



# **NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

## **THESIS**

**MY BROTHER'S KEEPER: FORGING SOF  
OPERATORS THROUGH DEVELOPMENTAL  
RELATIONSHIPS**

by

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June 2016

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**MY BROTHER'S KEEPER: FORGING SOF OPERATORS THROUGH  
DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIPS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

Personal and professional development is paramount to the growth and success of individuals and the organizations they comprise. The United States military's special operations forces (SOF) are elite small teams that work in austere situations globally. SOF operators are expected to be competent and capable at all times. They must rely on their team members for personal and professional development. This paper sought to assess the characteristics and outcomes of developmental relationships within SOF teams. Through interviews with SOF operators from the Army Special Forces, Navy SEALs, and Marine Raiders, the findings reinforce the necessity of development within teams. Numerous viewpoints emerged regarding the importance of team dynamics, leadership cohesion, and strong personal traits. SOF development providers' and recipients' insights helped paint a picture of developmental relationships within SOF teams—specifically, how and why development is initiated, what is provided, and how it benefits operators. The qualitative interview process exposed numerous implications for SOF operators, team leaders, and the greater SOF community regarding the importance of proactive and meaningful development.

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## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| AOIC      | Assistant Officer in Charge (the O2s in a SEAL Platoon) |
| B Team    | ODB or B Tm (SF company HQ at O4 level)                 |
| CO        | Commanding Officer                                      |
| CPO       | Chief Petty Officer (Navy E7–E9)                        |
| CPT       | Captain (O3 in Army)                                    |
| E7        | enlisted pay grade in the U.S. military (E1–E9)         |
| ETU       | Expeditionary Training Unit (MARSOC precursor)          |
| FID       | Foreign Internal Defense                                |
| GB        | Green Beret   |
| LCPO      | Leading Chief Petty Officer                             |
| LPO       | Leading Petty Officer                                   |
| LT        | Lieutenant (O3 in Navy in this thesis)                  |
| MARSOC    | Marine Special Operations Command (Raiders)             |
| MOS       | Military Occupational Specialty                         |
| MSOT      | Marine Special Operations Team                          |
| NCO       | Non-Commissioned Officer (E5–E9)                        |
| NCOER     | Non-Commissioned Officer Evaluation Report              |
| O3E       | officer pay grade with prior enlisted service           |
| O4        | officer pay grade in the U.S. military (O1–O10)         |
| ODA       | Operational Detachment Alpha (SF team)                  |
| OIC       | Officer in Charge (primarily the O3 in a SEAL PLT)      |
| PLT       | Platoon (SEAL O3 level team in this paper)              |
| PLT Chief | Platoon Chief (E7 in SEAL Platoon)                      |
| PLT SGT   | Platoon Sergeant (Army E7)                              |
| PO        | Petty Officer (Navy E4–E6)                              |
| SEA       | Senior Enlisted Advisor                                 |
| SEAL      | Sea, Air, and Land (NSW operator)                       |
| SF        | Special Forces (United States Army; Green Berets)       |
| SFODA     | Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha             |
| SFQC      | Special Forces Qualification Course                     |

|        |  |
|--------|--|
| SGM    | Sergeant Major (Army E9, typically the company SEA in this thesis) |
| SOCOM  | Special Operations Command   |
| SOF    | Special Operations Force(s) (includes all four services)           |
| SQT    | SEAL Qualification Training  |
| TL     | Team Leader (Special Forces O3)                                    |
| TM SGT | Team Sergeant (Special Forces E8)                                  |
| TRP    | Troop (two SEAL platoons in this thesis)                           |
| TS     | Team Sergeant  |
| USMC   | United States Marine Corps   |

## COMMON TERMS, DEFINITIONS, AND EXPLANATIONS

Except in specific context, we used many terms interchangeably throughout the paper. The focus herein was on development within the joint SOF environment, thus using service-specific terms is less important than the action that took place. The following terms are presented to enhance your understanding of the paper.

| <b>Joint / general term</b>      | <b>Army Special Forces</b>  | <b>Navy SEALs</b>                                | <b>Marine Raiders</b>   |
|----------------------------------|---|--|---|
| <b>SOF Operator</b>              | SF operator / Green Beret   | SEAL   | Raider  |
| <b>SOF team</b>                  | SF Operational Detachment Alpha (SFODA, ODA)                                      | SEAL Platoon                                     | Marine Special Operations Team (MSOT)   |
| <b>Senior Enlisted Advisor</b>   | Team Sergeant (E8)  | Platoon Chief (E7)                               | Team Chief (E7)   |
| <b>Team Commander</b>            | Detachment Commander / Team Leader (O3, Captain)                                  | Platoon Commander / Platoon OIC (O3, Lieutenant) | Team Commander (O3, Captain)  |
| <b>Team XO</b>                   | Assistant Det Cdr (W2)  | Assistant OIC (AOIC) (O2)                        | none  |
| <b>SOF company level</b>         | SF Company, SF Operational Detachment Bravo (SFODB; 6x ODA) (O4, Major / E9, SGM) | SEAL Troop (2x PLT) (O4, Lt Cmdr, E8, Sr Chief)  | Marine Special Operations Company (MSOC; 4x MSOT) (O4, Major / E8, 1st Sgt)     |
| <b>SOF battalion level</b>       | SF Battalion (18x ODA) (O5, LTC / E9, CSM)  | SEAL Team (8x PLT) (O5, CDR, Mstr Chief)         | Marine Special Operations Battalion (MSOB; 16x MSOT) (O5, Lt Col / E9, Sgt Maj) |
|                                  |   |  |   |
| <b>Primary term</b>              | <b>Alternate term 1</b>   | <b>Alternate term 2</b>                          | <b>Alternate term 3</b>   |
| <b>Developer</b>                 | Provider  | Mentor   |   |
| <b>Developee</b>                 | Recipient   | Mentee   | Protégé   |
| <b>Participant</b>               | Respondent  | Interviewee                                      |   |
| <b>Special operations forces</b> | SOF   | Special operations                               |   |
| <b>SOF operator</b>              | Operator  | Team mate  | Team guy  |

Notes:

- Many of the interview questions were asked with the caveat of “when you were on a team”; participants’ ranks may currently be higher than when they were on a team.

- As there were only two Marine Special Operations Command (MARSOC)/Raider participants in this research, their inputs are included in the qualitative summaries, but are excluded from the service-specific quantitative analysis in various sections.
- “Team Leader” refers to the Special Forces O3, whereas “team leader” can refer to any of the appointed leaders on a team.
- The term “Team” or “team” in this thesis is used to refer to the O3-level platoon, detachment, or team.
- Army Special Forces military occupation specialties (MOSs) referred to hereafter include: 18B (Weapons), 18C (Engineer), 18D (Medic), 18E (Communications), and 18F (Intelligence).
- This thesis is not meant to serve as an introduction to special operations, nor is it an all-inclusive guide to the discussed units. Those interested in more information on the units can consult <http://www.soc.mil/USASFC/HQ.html>, <http://www.marsoc.marines.mil>, and/or <http://www.public.navy.mil/nsw/Pages/default.aspx>.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Nearly 3,000 years ago, a warrior king prepared to take part in a war that would be remembered for ages. He assembled his men and ships and made every effort to ensure they were ready for battle. Though he meticulously prepared his men for war, he also prepared his kingdom for his absence. For upon departure, he would leave his wife and son with the responsibility of defending their island nation from those who would take it. Odysseus knew the safety of his kingdom depended on how his son would face the challenges and adversity that would confront him. Although his son Telemachus was competent and accepting of this responsibility, he lacked the wisdom and insight that comes with experience. To provide his son the necessary means to develop, Odysseus entrusted an old friend to serve as a role model and guide. His name was Mentor.

It would be more than twenty years before Odysseus would return home from the Trojan War. During this time of uncertainty, the nation of Ithaca was threatened by those who sought to wed Odysseus's wife Penelope in his absence. The suitors challenged Telemachus and made plans to take the kingdom by force. However, over the years, Mentor's valuable counsel and advice developed young Telemachus into a guardian of his people. Mentally and physically stronger than his enemies, Telemachus proved able to thrive in this adversity and defend his home until his father's return (Silk, 2004 *version*).

The necessity and importance of developing others transcends Homer's epic of 3,000 years ago and exists today. In multiple arenas, people and organizations are focusing on developing personnel in order to remain relevant in a fast-paced globalized world. To operate in this rapidly changing environment, organizations have come to decentralize authority and empower their employees to work together and make impactful decisions. As such, organizations recognize that success depends upon the quality and skill of their people, as well as their ability to work together in teams. Furthermore, organizations recognize that being able to employ a highly functioning team can often be the difference between success and failure. No one understands this better than members of the Special Operations Forces (SOF) community.

SOF organizations such as Special Forces, Raiders, and SEALs are composed of highly capable individuals who must work effectively as a group, within a military hierarchy, and in a variety of austere environments. Teams of special operators are expected to work autonomously and in smaller numbers than conventional forces. Working under these conditions requires that SOF teams be able to employ the key principles of purpose, simplicity, speed, security, repetition, and surprise to accomplish their missions (McRaven, 1995). However, the ability to make the most of these principles depends on the maturity, intelligence, mental and physical strength, and commitment of the individual operators on a team.

SOF organizations have spent numerous years refining their selection and training methods to find and develop the right persons for their teams. The attention SOF organizations pay to individual tactical and technical skill training is paramount for a team's success. However, there is an underutilized source of development that SOF organizations have not capitalized on: the developmental processes that take place among the operators themselves.

Each SOF operator is shaped by his experiences as a member of a team. His personal and professional life is influenced by his teammates and the organizational culture around him. Through interactions with his teammates, he is afforded an invaluable resource that cannot be replicated in any schoolhouse. Personal experiences shared by teammates guide future actions and thought processes. Attitudes and actions of fellow teammates shape an individual's perceptions and expectations of how special operators should conduct themselves. These influences have multiple impacts on his ability to be a competent operator, teammate, and representative of his community.

These developmental relationships are integral to being on a SOF team. In fact, they are inescapable. Therefore, understanding these processes and how they shape and influence special operators is vitally important. It is vital for those operators who will be in a position to develop others. It is vital for those who will seek development as they attempt to navigate new challenges. Finally, it is vital for leaders in their communities so that they may set the conditions and organizational culture in such a way that it facilitates



the personal and professional growth of SOF's most significant commodity: our teammates.

## **A. RESEARCH QUESTION AND OUTLINE**

To guide our research, we chose the following research question: *What are the characteristics and outcomes of developmental relationships that occur within SOF teams?*

First, we present our findings on developmental relationships as they pertain to SOF team environments and leadership roles and influences. Second, we present our findings regarding development from the point of view of the person being developed. Third, we present our findings of development within SOF teams from the perspective of the person developing another. Finally, we close with our prescriptive models of development intended to enhance the effectiveness of SOF teams, the implications of our findings, our recommendations for future action, and our conclusions.

Additionally, our research unearthed findings that were tangential to our specific focus on development, but might still be of interest to some readers. We present this information in appendices:

- Appendix A reproduces our interview questions.
- Appendix B provides information about why respondents joined the military and why they joined SOF.
- Appendix C highlights concerns particular to the Special Forces Regiment.
- Appendix D presents operator viewpoints about the effects of organizational size and formal programs on development.

## **B. REVIEW OF EXISTING LITERATURE**

### **1. Developmental relationships**

At its core, a developmental relationship is characterized by quality interactions between two or more people with the intent of fostering personal and professional development and task learning (D'Abate, Eddy, & Tannenbaum, 2003; Kram, 1985; Murphy & Kram, 2010). Examples of developmental relationships include: action

learning, apprenticeship, coaching, distance mentoring, executive coaching, formal mentoring, group mentoring, informal mentoring, multiple mentors or developers, peer coaching, traditional mentoring, and tutoring (D'Abate et al., 2003). Over the past 35 years, research in the area of developmental relationships has flourished, in large part thanks to the multiple benefits developmental relationships have been found to provide individuals and organizations (Hunt & Michael, 1983; Jacobi, 1991; Kram, 1985; Murphy & Kram, 2010).

Individual-level benefits include enhanced skills, career and professional development, work satisfaction, organizational commitment, and self-efficacy (Parker, Hall, & Kram, 2008; Scandura, 1990). For organizations, developmental relationships may increase productivity, improve retention rates, and enhance organizational success (D'Abate, Eddy, & Tannenbaum, 2003; Payne & Huffman, 2005). Additional research in the field also indicates that certain developmental relationships promote leader development (Lester, Hannah, Harms, Vogelgesang, & Avolio, 2011).

Researchers in the field have borrowed from social exchange theory, identity theory, social network theory, and findings on adult development (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson, & McKee, 1978; Murphy & Kram, 2010). Early works on developmental relationships primarily focused on studying the model of a traditional mentor in a hierarchical setting (Kram, 1985; Levinson et al., 1978). This was largely influenced by the organizational construct of the day, when virtually all businesses were bureaucratic and hierarchical in nature. The stable working environment thus allowed the mentor-mentee relationship to be more easily established since personnel stayed with their organizations for longer periods of time (Higgins & Kram, 2001). However, as the modern workplace has evolved, developmental relationships have likewise changed over time and/or new types have been discovered (Bergelson, 2014; Kram, 1985; Shen, Cotton, & Kram, 2015).

Today's research into developmental relationships can be categorized into four primary types: business, academic, military, and military-academic (Smith, Howard, & Harrington, 2005). Most of the business-oriented literature focuses on examining the effects of mentoring, peer coaching, and developmental networks on career mobility and

personal development (Hunt & Michael, 1983; Kram, 1985; Scandura, 1992; Payne & Huffman, 2005; Bergelson, 2014). Research within the academic context primarily centers on the mentoring relationships that occur between students and professors in varying educational venues (Jacobi, 1991; Quinn, Muldoon, & Hollingworth, 2002; Schrod, Cawyer, & Sanders, 2003). Within the military and military-academic contexts, much research and policy making has been geared towards developing personnel in conventional units and the military academies (Smith et al., 2005; Department of the Navy, 2013; Johnson & Anderson, 2010; Department of the Air Force, 2013).

One challenge presented by the current state of literature is a lack of consistency. For example, depending on the source, terms such as “mentorship” and “coaching” can have different meanings or are used interchangeably. Attempts by scholars (D’Abate et al., 2003) to synthesize the literature and look for consistency in the nomenclature have revealed that even experts in the field vary greatly in how they use the same terms. We found that the characteristics ascribed to developmental relationships not only tend to be unique to different organizational constructs, but are also subject to interpretation by the researcher. This suggests that taking a more nuanced SOF-specific approach may be the next logical step for understanding developmental relationships in SOF teams.

## **2. Developmental relationships in the military**

To date, most literature related to developmental relationships in the military has centered on the construct of mentorship (Smith et al., 2005). Two factors are at play here. First, in an attempt to mirror the success of mentoring in the business sector, military leaders have initiated a major push to implement mentoring programs in recent years (Johnson & Andersen, 2010). Second, the hierarchical and leader-centric culture of the military working environment is conducive to facilitating traditional mentorship roles. The relatively few studies on mentoring programs in military units have shown some positive results (Johnson & Anderson, 2010; Lester et al., 2011). However, the data are extremely limited and are solely derived from conventional units and students attending military academies, neither of which are adequate proxies for specialized small groups such as SOF teams.

On further examination, we discovered a number of additional gaps in the current literature. As stated previously, developmental relationships take a number of forms and present a wide array of characteristics (D'Abate et al., 2003). By only focusing on mentorship, studies have ignored other types of developmental relationships that exist in the military. As a result, “mentoring” has served as a catch-all for numerous terms and mentorship has been assumed to be more effective than it really is for personnel development (Johnson & Andersen, 2010).

Another set of problems is that military mentoring programs are largely formal in nature, mandated, and their success depends on top-down attention (Department of the Air Force, 2013; Department of the Navy, 2013). In some instances, a top-down approach may help units initiate mentorship programs. However, studies suggest that formal, mandated programs are less desirable and less effective than informal mentoring relationships (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006; Noe, 1988). In addition, a recent survey of Army officers revealed that though many want mentorship, they “do not want formal programs to legislate these relationships” (Johnson & Andersen, 2010, p. 118).

Finally, the fact that most studies have been done on military academy students raises questions about how applicable the findings are to SOF units (Johnson & Andersen, 2010; Hu, Wang, Sun, & Chen, 2008; Smith et al., 2005). With few exceptions, students in military academies are aged 18–22 years old, live an extremely regimented lifestyle, and have little to no military experience (Johnson & Andersen, 2010). By contrast, the typical SOF operator is in his late twenties to early thirties and has over 10 years of military experience. Furthermore, a SOF operator works in an autonomous, empowered, and decentralized group environment (Department of the Army, 2015).

An attempt to draw comparisons and inferences about developmental relationships for SOF teams based on other groups is fraught with problems. The degree to which an organizational construct influences the characteristics of developmental relationships is simply too profound. In short, to assess the characteristics of developmental relationships within SOF units requires taking steps beyond the existing literature.

### **C. PURPOSE AND SCOPE**

The purpose of our primarily qualitative research was to determine the characteristics and outcomes of developmental relationships that occur within SOF teams. We sought to accomplish this through interviewing SOF operators from the U.S. Army, U.S. Navy, and U.S. Marine Corps who had experience on a SOF team. We specifically chose Army Special Forces, Navy SEALs, and Marine Raiders due to the similarities among their organizational structures and doctrinal missions. Other SOF units such as Army Rangers, SOF aviation, or Civil Affairs were viewed as beyond the scope of our research.

### **D. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Our research design utilized qualitative interviews of officer and enlisted U.S. military special operators. To gain an understanding of developmental relationships, interviews focused on individuals' career histories on SOF teams. As a part of the interview process, participants were asked to provide some basic, but not individually identifiable, demographic data that enabled us to statistically analyze responses among and between cohorts. Questions sought to identify significant relationships that enhanced career-focused and/or psycho-social functions. Questions were also developed to gauge how the nature of the organizational structure influenced the type of relationship observed (Kram, 1985). All interview questions, identified as "Q1, Q2, Q3..." in the paper, are listed in Appendix A.

In addition, we sought to find out about the outcomes of these relationships. Additional inferences from data gathered or coded from the interviews lent a quantitative and thus hybrid research design. From the qualitative and quantitative data, we were able to build a working model of the characteristics and outcomes of developmental relationships within SOF teams. Some responses were analyzed qualitatively, others quantitatively, and each added value to understanding development within SOF teams. As patterns emerged, we focused on grouping the data into a framework of developmental relationships (D'Abate et al., 2003; Kram, 1985).

## **E. INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS**

The base requirements that each participant met prior to being interviewed were that he was a qualified special operator who fit our population scope, and that he had to be willing to share his team experiences. Although SOF teams are usually around 90% enlisted, this research sample has a larger proportion of officers than is representative of the community. Many of the officers interviewed recently came from serving in a leadership role on a SOF team and had a greater hand in development than many of the junior operators, thus the sample data was valuable. Ultimately, our research focused on those who serve or had served on a SOF team, regardless of their specific role on the team.

We interviewed 33 SOF operators for this research with each interview lasting about 50 minutes. The most common operator we interviewed was about 32 years old, had 11 years in service, 6 years in SOF, with 3 years in a SOF leadership position. Overall, there were 14 enlisted and 19 officers in pay grades E6 through O6. Four of the 19 officers had prior experience as enlisted special operators. There were 16 Navy SEALs, 15 Army Special Forces, and 2 Marine Raiders. Cumulatively our participants had 389 years of SOF experience and 179 years of SOF leadership experience. The information in Table 1 summarizes the participant demographics. For additional information on participant backgrounds, (and particularly on why they joined), see Appendix B.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

| <b>n = 33</b>  |                 |                     |                |                |
|--|-----------------|---------------------|----------------|----------------|
| <b>Participant demographics</b>  |                 |                     |                |                |
|  | <b>Enlisted</b> | <b>Officer (E)*</b> | <b>Officer</b> | <b>Totals</b>  |
| SEAL   | 9               | 4                   | 3              | 16             |
| Special Forces   | 5               | 0                   | 10             | 15             |
| Raider   | 0               | 0                   | 2              | 2              |
| <b>Totals</b>  | 14              | 4                   | 15             |                |
|  |                 |                     |                |                |
|  | <b>Mean</b>     | <b>Median</b>       | <b>Mode</b>    | <b>Std Dev</b> |
| Age  | 37.6            | 36.0                | 32.0           | 6.9            |
| Time in Service (years)  | 15.5            | 15.0                | 10.5           | 6.1            |
| Time in SOF (years)  | 11.8            | 12.0                | 5.0            | 7.3            |
| Time in SOF.LDR** (years)  | 5.4             | 3.0                 | 3.0            | 5.2            |
| *Officer (E) = served as a former enlisted special operator; **SOF.LDR = time spent in a SOF leadership position |                 |                     |                |                |

## F. BACKGROUND OF THE POPULATION

Nearly 70,000 service members, civilians, and special operators comprise USSOCOM, with operators working in a variety of job specialties from each of the four services. The SEAL platoons, Special Forces ODAs, and Raider teams often conduct missions as self-contained singular units wherever they are sent around the globe. The O3 team commanders and E7–E8 enlisted leaders are solely responsible for the operational mission and the wellbeing of their 10–18 additional enlisted operators. Although some cultural or service distinctions exist from different services SOF units, they often work side by side in combat deployments and in training scenarios.

Each SEAL, SF, or Raider operator on his team has qualified to be there by passing through his service’s grueling 1.5- to 3-year-long training pipeline. Those in leadership positions have undergone additional training and screening measures to ensure they earn their positions. After arriving at his team, each operator must continue to earn his place among the elite. Throughout their careers, SOF operators continue to complete highly specialized individual and collective team training to remain individually ready and collectively deployable.

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## **II. THE SOF TEAM: TEAM DEVELOPMENT ENVIRONMENTS, DYNAMICS, THE OPERATORS, AND LEADERS' ROLES**

Special operations teams can range from an undermanned SF or Raider team of 8–9 operators, to a robust SEAL platoon of 20 or more. Most teams inevitably include a few very new or junior guys, a couple of very experienced senior guys, and the leaders appointed to run the show. The dynamics on every team, even those within the same company or troop, can differ widely. Team guys must be able to rely on each other and support their leadership. Team leaders need to be aware of team strengths and weaknesses, have a finger on the pulse of the men, and be able to balance the team's operational focus with team personalities and needs. Most importantly, leaders are responsible for setting the environmental conditions that allow development to thrive. We will explore some aspects of the SOF team before analyzing some operator-level characteristics and functions.

### **A. CONDUCTIVE ENVIRONMENTS (Q33)**

For personal or professional development to occur within SOF teams, the environment or setting must be conducive to learning and growing. Respondents were asked: *Can you describe a team environment that would be conducive to development of SOF operators?*

According to the responses, teams are the places where guys learn their craft through trial and error. Anyone and everyone on the team must feel able to ask questions at any time, and likewise feel free to challenge assumptions or provide relevant input at any stage of an operation. Trust is paramount, both up and down the chain of command. Subordinates must feel that leaders have their backs and genuinely care for their personal and professional well-being. Personalities matter significantly when it comes to team dynamics, particularly the personalities of leaders. Team leaders must support individual and team development by encouraging and empowering operators to both develop others and seek development from their teammates. Distractions and negative attitudes that

hinder the sharing of ideas, lessons learned from experience, and trust between operators must be eliminated to create a developmentally-conducive environment.

Representative comments provided by interviewees:

It starts with the leaders setting the tone, giving the expectations, and facilitate that it's okay to screw up, but you learn from it. You can't have a zero-defect environment. You have to be able to try and fail, and to support guys when they fail, and support them up the chain of command. (O3E, SEAL)

[You want] an atmosphere where you have the ability to fail in training, to really learn, while still being able to recover personally and professionally. You need to learn as a group, which is kind of hard to do, but it's ideal. (O4, Raider)

Personality-wise, there needs to be a lot of openness. Most guys aren't afraid to say anything to anyone, there's no fear of being politically correct or called out for some sort of harassment. There needs to be a command climate, where whomever in charge trusts his NCOs to carry out their tasks. (E6, Special Forces)

[The ideal environment is] one where leaders and subordinates have constant interaction, but without the micromanagement. You need to be allowed to make mistakes, and where leaders don't terminate the subordinate if he screws up. You need to be allowed to make mistakes and get constant feedback, which goes both ways. (O4, Special Forces)

[The ideal environment encourages] volunteering to help each other out, selfless behavior and attitudes, and having each other's back. It's the "we are in this together" mentality. You don't want to let down your boys. (E7, SEAL)

Interestingly, participating in a JCET (Joint Combined Exchange Training), being in a JCET-like venue, or on deployment was often reported as being conducive to development. These missions take teams away from the flagpole and higher echelons, away from garrison duties, away from immediate family distractions, and enable the team to narrow its focus. Every individual on the team is necessary to accomplish the mission. Operators can develop deeper interpersonal bonds, go through repeated "trial and error" learning, and have their immediate team leaders there to help guide them. Leaders on the team become the primary judge-jury-executioner for nearly all tasks, large or small. This empowers team-level leaders to rely on themselves and their subordinates to figure things

out, versus seeking regular input from higher echelons or steady assistance from force enablers.

Representative comments follow:

The JCET is the best environment; it's when teams are on their own. All the garrison requirements on teams are big distractions, people are pulled in all directions so the team sergeant has no time to develop guys. (O4, Special Forces)

Deployed time was best for individual development. You could interact with each other after hours, there were fewer barriers, fewer distractions. (O4, Special Forces)

Collective training [is best], due to the reduction in other detractors. Being out in the field with the team is the best place. (O5, Special Forces)

Even in combat you're handed a lot of things, your resupply bundles, contractors to fix stuff that breaks. On a JCET it's just the team and guys have to figure it out. (O4, Special Forces)

## **B. THE DEVELOPER TO BE (Q37)**

Along with considering the right environment for development, operators have a vested interest in who their developers are. Without asking about specific developmental relationships, we wanted to see what kinds of development recipients did or did not value. In later chapters we will dig into this more deeply.

Participants were asked: *What characteristics do you most value in someone who develops you?* Those working in the hierarchical military do not get to choose their developer or mentor very often. At the same time they typically see the same people every day, especially in a small team setting and may have few other options of who to turn to. The responses below reflect who developees would pick if they had the opportunity and what attributes they seek. Common themes centered on someone who sets an example, is personable, is genuine, and has experience.

Lead by example. Get to know me to unlock my potential. Know what my goals are and make corrections or give guidance to help me achieve them. Someone whose words are congruent with actions. Take time to reach out to build a rapport. (E7, Special Forces)

Patience. Understanding. Honesty. Be honest when giving criticism for both wrong and right things. Lead by example. Treat everyone fairly with regards to reward, punishment, expectations, and standards. (E6, SEAL)

Personable, easy to talk to, good at his job, shows commitment. (O3, SEAL)

Humility, competence, knowing what you don't know and that some stuff is outside your control. (O3E, SEAL)

Someone that knows what the fuck they are talking about. Strength, life experience, mentorship, being humble, and team experience. Tells you exactly the way it is. Be truthful but spare the feelings part. Honesty. (E8, SEAL)

Proactive, engaging and willing to help me. Passionate about the job. Demonstrates the ability to motivate, willing to share, humble, understanding and demanding at the same time. Can spot a deficiency and offer help. "I tracked you down to help you." (E9, SEAL)

Someone I can relate to, genuine, an interest in me, not just because he's my boss. A genuine interest in making me better and who seems excited about the opportunity to invest time in my development. (O4, Special Forces)

Someone who has experienced what I've experienced, willing to lend an ear, withholds judgment, provides constructive criticism to help you grow, and no holds barred on that. If in a leadership position, be willing to have your back, and show they have your back, but of course not to the detriment of their own career or the organization. (O4, Special Forces)

Be sincere, it's easy to tell when you are not. Loyalty, you have to let me make mistakes, but also back me when I screw up for doing what I thought was the right thing. (O4, Raider)

Energetic, interested, open-minded, knowledgeable—you have to know your job and know what you're talking about. (O4, Raider)

Trust. Trustworthiness. Competency, capability, job knowledge, and proficiency. (O4, Special Forces)

### **C. THE DEVELOPER NOT TO BE (Q34)**

Additionally, participants were asked to describe who they would absolutely not go to: *While on your team, who would you not go to for personal or professional development...and why?* Some respondents had a particular person in mind (we did not

want names) and others focused on a recurring type. The responses primarily focused on personal and behavioral attributes that potential developers lacked or struggled with. We categorized the responses into three groups: personal attributes (moral, ethical, attitude, etc.), professional attributes (competence, experience, work ethic, etc.), or both. Respondents indicated that 31% of the time they would not seek development from someone due to the developer's personal attributes, 22% of the time they would not seek development from someone based on his professional attributes (or lack thereof), and 47% they would not seek development from someone because of his personal and professional attribute deficiencies. Some of the responses follow:

Anyone I did not respect. If I could not look to you or respect you I'm not going to you. (E7, SEAL)

Guys who weren't good at their jobs; one guy was a great person, but not as good at his job, I could go to him for personal questions. Assholes, those morally unsound, or not open to human connection. (O3, SEAL)

First is competence, second is do guys feel that the leadership has their back? If no to either of these, you mark that person as a minefield and go find someone else. Superiors should be challenged, in a positive sense, not in challenging authority per se. (O5, Special Forces)

I despise arrogance. Maybe sometimes there are guys who are less experienced than me, but then they may still have something to offer in a different area. If a team guy had a bad reputation because of laziness or cutting corners, guys would just go around him. (O3E, SEAL)

It's personality based. The junior wants to go to the senior—who theoretically has more experience. If the team sergeant isn't approachable, if he's crusty and has no patience... You want someone who shows competence and willingness to take the time to show someone properly. (O4, Special Forces)

It stems from being an asshole. There's tough, there's firm, then there's the guy who thinks he has to yell all the time. Even if they have the answer you need, you'll go out of your way to go to someone else. The dude who is always mad just turns me off. Your subordinates won't want to do that much for you because they don't want to get yelled at. (E7, Special Forces)

The first team sergeant was toxic, he couldn't be trusted, he was two-faced. The second team sergeant was immoral at best. They were all

motivated by their own self-interests. You couldn't go to any of the juniors because they didn't know anything. (E7, Special Forces)

I wouldn't go to the junior guys for personal development, but I would go to them for technical things. I would go to the more senior guys for some personal stuff. There are probably 1–2 personalities on every team that need some managing—so that they don't influence others in the wrong way. (O4, Raider)

A shit show. The guy felt like he should be mentoring me but our values were unaligned. It was a bad experience. Positional authority is not always a good basis for mentoring. The junior guy should select/request his mentor. (O4, SEAL)

The team sergeant—because he was sneaky, didn't trust his men, he didn't recognize guys for their efforts, he was corrosive from the beginning. We couldn't trust him, he was incompetent. He was fired along with others and it took a while for the team to fully get back on its feet. (E7, Special Forces)

Much of the collective feedback indicates that despite the nature of military hierarchy or the limited options on small teams, SOF operators will avoid incompetence and selfish individuals in order to get the development they feel they deserve or need. Since the seeker of development is predominantly a junior operator, it places an additional mantle of responsibility on senior personnel and/or the leadership to be capable of providing quality development. In our experience, the ability to provide outstanding personal and professional development is likely linked to the developer's own attributes. It is difficult to share something positive with others if you do not have it yourself. Even if you think you are capable of providing development, no one will come near you if you are not the right person.

#### **D. JUNIOR AND SENIOR OPERATORS (Q35 & Q36)**

Developer capabilities may be indirectly but uniquely linked to one's status as a junior or senior operator in the community. Demographic status as a senior or junior does not necessarily indicate levels of experience or ability to provide quality development to others. We asked participants to tell us those characteristics that team juniors and seniors generally lacked. Some of the comments may seem similar to those in the previous section (*...who would you not go to...*) but we offer them to assist operators' management

of team members' expectations. Being a team senior is determined by a combination of factors that may be different on each team. At times an operator's position or rank can make him a team senior, although his skills and experience may be lacking.

### **1. Developer challenges with junior operators (Q35)**

The junior in a developmental relationship is not always the newest SOF operator, since the status of developpee is relative to his developer (for example, E7 to E7 peer, O4 to O3, E9 to E8, etc.) On the other hand, new SOF operators often tend to be developpees. Those who are brand new to a team may also be quite new to the military and may be younger and less experienced in a number of categories. We were interested in operators' perceptions of their newer team members.

When asked: *In your experience, when a newly qualified SOF operator arrived to the team, what characteristics do you feel he most lacked?*, respondents tended to refer to things such as humility, experience, combat experience, or seeing the bigger picture. None of their comments were meant to be derogatory, but rather to describe conditions as they saw them. Many participants indicated they were impressed with the skills that new operators are learning, and that gaining experience is a merely a product of time on a team.

To better understand the variety of one- or multi-word answers we received, we categorized the responses into three groups: personal attributes, professional attributes, and understanding the operational environment. Personal attributes include humility, pride, attitude, fear, close-mindedness, self-awareness, morals, confidence, a sense of entitlement, integrity, and so on. Professional attributes include work ethic, knowledge, experience, competence, dedication, and a leadership capability. Understanding the operational environment refers to situational awareness, seeing the big picture, and learning the how and why of special operations at multiple echelons. According to our respondents, 41% said that juniors lack personal attributes, 39% cited a lack of professional attributes, and 20% mentioned juniors' lack of understanding about the operational environment.

It has changed over my career; early on you got to the team but hadn't earned your Trident yet. Things changed so that newer guys who got to the team already had their Trident. They had more attitude. (O3E, SEAL)

It wasn't across the board, but the worst-case instances were some guys who lacked humility. They felt that because they graduated [Special Forces Qualification Course (SFQC)] that they had "arrived." On the other hand some others didn't fully appreciate how much they had learned in the schoolhouse, thus felt they had nothing to contribute to the team. (O4, Special Forces)

Unwillingness to ask questions, a fear of failure. Entitlement. (O3E, SEAL)

Humility. Right before I left, the teams started getting guys who'd done the entire SOF pipeline. They were good, and they knew they were good, but they weren't better than everyone else who had experience on the team. You need a willingness to learn; assessment is continuous. (O4, Raider)

Experience. Self awareness. Maturity. Tunnel vision. Not knowing the decision making process and the outcomes that may come. (E9, SEAL)

Confidence, self-awareness. Knowledge. Experience. When I was a new guy I didn't know how to ask for help. Hubris prevented me from asking. (O4, SEAL)

When it went wrong, it was already something inherent in their personalities. It wasn't really anyone else's fault, but it was guys who slipped through the cracks and shouldn't have been SF in the first place. When they were successful, they were motivated, they were trustworthy, and competent at their jobs. (E7, Special Forces)

Knowledge. They're far behind, but it's not their fault. I'm pretty impressed with what they do have. The problem is the guys who are smart but lazy, because they've already peaked out. I'll take a mediocre guy with a strong work ethic any day. (E8, Special Forces)

Examples like these should help new operators understand "what not to do." More important is that team leaders are aware of the challenges involved in developing the newer SOF population. Every SOF operator had his "Day 1" at some point, and it is understood that some aspects of development require time spent doing what teams do. One perspective is that the "operational environment" issues, as well as a portion of the professional attributes juniors lack are things they will learn or improve on the job. It is



likely the remaining professional attributes they lack along with their personal attributes are what guys bring to the team with them. If 41% have personal deficiencies, it is indicative that screening should probably be improved.

## **2. Developmental shortcomings of senior operators (Q36)**

Being senior on a team varies by service, demographics, and the current makeup of a team. The seniors on a Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (SFODA) are typically the five E7 billets, whereas a SEAL platoon has only one E7 billet, the platoon chief. Rank aside, an E6 on a team might have three combat deployments whereas an E7 is preparing for his first. Another E6 might be in his early forties, have two graduate degrees, and a wealth of world travel, yet is brand new to the military. His senior might be an E7 with seven years in the military, no family or life experience, and has just turned 25 years old.

We asked respondents: *In your experience, regarding the senior personnel on your team, what developmental characteristics do you feel they most lacked?* We defined the team seniors as the “big 3” or “big 4” (the top 3–4 leaders on a team) on each team. Also included could be the senior E6s in a SEAL PLT or the more senior E6/7s on a Raider or SF team. Worth noting is that this interview question is not a direct opposite of the previous one. Everyone on a team expects junior operators to have deficiencies until they are seasoned enough to have worked through them. In contrast, senior operators, especially those in leadership positions, are expected to be extremely capable and competent subject matter experts with years of experience. When a senior operator is labeled as lacking significantly in a personal or professional area, he is more detrimental to the team than is an overwhelmed E5. If a senior talks about what a junior lacks, he is stating the obvious. If a junior finds a senior lacking, it is because the senior has personally and professionally let him down.

### **Representative comments:**

It starts with the seniors in each section, taking the time to do the right things. Some of the guys kind of overlook the mentor thing. The seniors should have a better understanding of trying to develop a subordinate. (E7, Special Forces)

They should be more collaborative and take advantage of networking with other SEALs in the unit. Too much ego gets in the way. Lack the ability to organize and meet others to help their subordinates with awards/recognition. Inability or reluctance to seek help from others. Communication skills (writing/speaking). (E7, SEAL)

There's too much competition with the team for anyone to take a real interest in another's professional development. It's not taken seriously, in my opinion. Seniors didn't take an interest in juniors. It was just "watch me, do as I do," there wasn't any talk about why we do what we do in SF. (O4, Special Forces)

A realization that it takes effort to develop others. It can't be done passively. You can't just exemplify being a SOF guy, make good decisions, and that's it. It has to be active / pro-active, some guys didn't realize that. (O4, Special Forces)

Information on what the dynamics are at the ground level—not having a pulse of what perceptions are. Not listening to junior opinions/perceptions. Unaware of what is going on with the guys. (E6, SEAL)

Some struggled with leading by being a good follower; and just because you're not the designated "leader" doesn't mean you're not being looked at as a leader. (O4, Special Forces)

[Referring to officers] You are there to be more than just an operator; professionalism; not playing the right role of an officer. Guys try to blend in with tattoos and dip instead of being held to a higher standard. [Referring to enlisted] Not fully committed to the guys. (O6, SEAL)

My team warrant lacked approachability, his personality was just gruff as an individual, he would often just go do work by himself in the corner. He was often concerned about getting into someone else's lane. The Team Sergeant was great, but was long-winded. I always had a lot to do and probably gave the appearance of being too busy to be approached. (O4, Special Forces)

Many had forgot a lot of the basics, the fundamentals of infantry combat. When we went to Afghanistan they'd tossed all the doctrinal Ranger School stuff out the window. I was surprised the first time we did an OPORD, guys didn't know how to brief/plan. Putting together a basic ambush, guys had just forgotten the details. Some of the guys weren't very receptive to my input as a captain, we had to go rehearse and let them realize on their own that they didn't know what they were talking about. (O4, Special Forces)

Humility, a guy must be able to take professional criticism. Attitude of the group suffers. (E7, SEAL)

Facing a paradox of being brand new but also being in charge at the same time. Self confidence to accept criticism. Guys try to hide their deficiencies. Ego. Facing expectations from subordinates to be competent. Need to be patient and make assessments. (O4, Special Forces)

Mostly they just seemed to be building themselves up, getting to the right schools, making rank, looking good for the Sergeant Major. You seldom saw them sit down with the others and help guide them in their own careers. (E7, Special Forces)

There are circumstances when either the appointed leaders lack the capability to fully perform their duties, or when others on the team are as, if not more, capable of providing development and sound guidance to other teammates. These situations lead to other seniors on the team stepping up, whether by necessity or not. Seniors with something to offer should always reach out to their juniors and provide development. However, interview respondents implied that seniors do not always see the situation the same way. The way things like fusion and synergy work is that everyone who has something to give does so, and then gives a little bit more. The results are an impressive and highly capable team.

Representative comments of interviewees:

New guys want to be hot shots, so they try to shield themselves, they put up walls so they don't appear weak. The onus of why some development doesn't happen is more on the new guy, with his walls, but it's up to the seniors on the team to break it down. (O4, Special Forces)

A senior 18B took it upon himself to expand his role. We had maybe a weak team sergeant at that time and the captain never really got outside of his regular army mentality. So the 18B kind of stood up as the acting team sergeant for the team at least in some areas/roles. Since the 18B moved on, it has seemed that other senior NCOs that come to the team kind of step in and fill the weak TS void as well. (E6, Special Forces)

Another Team Sergeant was very helpful, we had some training plans together as teams (I had kind of a bad TS dynamic on my team), so he helped me get the logistics/timeline stuff together. (O4, Special Forces)

If you have a team sergeant who is a shithead then... a toxic person is going to infect someone who might have some potential. You've got the wrong people teaching the right guys. (E7, Special Forces)

Recently I've noticed an unwillingness to trust NCOs in general, to give them responsibilities. Every officer that comes through is going to be smart and articulate, but they struggle with understanding the roles of the organization. That E8 is supposed to have a lot of experience, but he and the warrant really don't reflect that currently. They don't really embody the experienced SF NCO that they are (or were). (E6, Special Forces)

The situations are unfortunate, in our experience, when the team chief or one of the senior leaders on the team is incapable at doing his job or has not earned the respect of the team. Those circumstances are hopefully few and far between and ideally gapped by other capable seniors who can step up and provide the development that the team needs. One reason seniors might not meet expectations could be due to the faster post-9/11 pace of operations.

As the demand for SOF increased after 2001, Special Operations Command sought to increase the end strength of its special operations forces to keep up with the demanding deployment schedule (Robinson, 2013, p. 4). Every service SOF command would likely argue that its selection standards remained the same, even with an increase in the number of operators. Many of the early civilian-to-operator entrants are now senior E7s and even E8s. Some of them occupy Team Sergeant and Warrant Officer positions on teams. Without getting into the pros and cons of the 18X or similar programs, many respondents brought up the effects of growing the SOF community and how it has impacted operator development:

Lack of ability to approach guys, they are either too busy or inexperienced. Most depend on the Chief for mentorship aspect. Not intrusive enough. Lack of confidence. (O3E, SEAL)

Leadership experience. We don't have the mechanism. Yeah, there's the junior-senior relationship, but some guys just want to do their MOS and nothing more. (O5, Special Forces)

Experience. Young NSW enlisted guys are obtaining critical positions with less life experience. Not their fault. (E9, SEAL)

Early on, I thought people were making E7 too fast, so now guys who are senior E7s and E8s lack some of the development they should have had. Some were not able to successfully be a part of the team, often due to a personality issue. (E7, Special Forces)

Can't handle position of power. Lack of experience equals guys fail as Chiefs. Trouble handling strong personalities in platoon. Have to be strong, lead by example, be a decision maker, and have team experience. (E8, SEAL)

After 9/11 the government and everyone decided we needed to mass produce SF guys, but you can't just throw spaghetti on the lawn and see what sticks. SOF can't be mass produced. Cut sling load on the 80% of the force who are just mutants. (E7, Special Forces)

Over the past 10 years there are a lot more 18Xs on the teams, who are now getting into the E8 positions, vice some of the older crusty generations of SF guys. It's the blind leading the blind. (E6, Special Forces)

## **E. ARMY-SPECIFIC DEVELOPER CHALLENGES**

In addition to growing the force, some issues arise due to the structure of some SOF units; this is particularly true of Army SF. In the general purpose forces, someone can be in charge of other soldiers beginning with the rank of E4, and begin writing (or assisting with) non-commissioned officer evaluation reports (NCOERs) and conducting counseling around the E5 to E6 mark. Yet, in Special Forces, an operator can have over a decade's worth of operational experience before he is truly responsible for other soldiers, and before he is responsible for annual evaluations and counseling. Although Green Berets are supposed to be teachers, this does not directly equate to each one knowing how, or caring enough, to invest in others' personal and professional development.

SF has a leadership problem, because even E5/6/7s in SF are never really in charge of anything, it's the E8. The E6 in the infantry is in charge of the same amount of guys as the E8 in SF. (E8, Special Forces)

When I came to my new section, one guy has no idea how to write an NCOER, nor did the guy who wrote it for him. Another guy's NCOER is overdue and the team sergeant isn't tracking it. The 18F said it doesn't really matter, they'll all make E7 anyways. (E7, Special Forces)

The E7s mostly got it by that point. Some of the E6s didn't have the same level of maturity as an E6 in the infantry; they still didn't quite grasp the overall gist of Army life, or of leadership. E5s and some E4s are in charge of other soldiers in the infantry, but an E6 in SF is still usually junior to someone else; so there's a disparity between E6 and E7. (O4, Special Forces)

Special operators have often received more training and are older than their counterparts in the conventional military. This is important so that they can work in smaller numbers with less supervision. The team chief needs to be able to split his team up five ways and trust that each 2–3-man element can execute its operational task with effective precision. Being able to perform to this standard is what the quarterly and annual individual and collective training checklists are geared towards. However, the idea that each man is also a growing and developing person and operator seems to be more of an afterthought. Whether the conventional military develops its troops better or worse than SOF is beyond the scope of this thesis.

## **F. TEAM LEADERSHIP**

Discussions about SOF teams, effective and ineffective developers, and the strengths and weaknesses of senior and junior operators reveal a common theme: the importance of a SOF team's leaders. While service cultures and rank structures may vary slightly, each special operations team is headed by appointed individuals. Appointed leaders on SOF teams consist of an officer and senior enlisted member at a minimum. Presumably those put in these positions are qualified and competent individuals who have earned both the respect and the right to fill each role.

According to respondents, the big three or four on each team must be unified and harmonious in word and deed. In our experience, subordinates often view the leadership as “mom and dad,” and thus want to see them getting along, supporting each other, relying on each other through thick and thin, and ultimately giving their utmost to enable the team's success. Leaders must have earned the trust of subordinates and have their backs. Much of the team personality is determined by the leadership personality. There is ample literature on leadership in and out of the military. We did not ask any specific interview questions about team leaders and their place in providing development.

However, many of the questions about developers elicited numerous comments about the senior leadership on teams.

[The team environment] depends on the personality. Leaders drive the climate of the platoon or troop. (O6, SEAL)

You need to get buy-in from the platoon triad ([officer in charge] OIC, Chief, LPO). If they support it [effective development], it can happen. (O3, SEAL)

Leadership attitude is important. Platoon leaders should support team leadership and command mission. The boys will follow suit with the leadership's attitude. (E8, SEAL)

Chemistry. Leadership is aligned/on same sheet of music. Setting good example with collaborative leadership. Senior enlisted drive the atmosphere. Personalities are a strong influence as well. (O6, SEAL)

The top two, the PLT CDR & Chief, need good harmony. Beyond that, the big four need good harmony. If the Chief is hesitant to make the call, then it trickles down. (O3E, SEAL)

Team leaders are in positions to have a lot of influence on subordinate operators. Some leaders do not realize the responsibility that inheres in their position. Some who are in leadership roles may not feel it is their role to develop others—i.e., “that’s Chief’s job, I’m just the officer.” Some do not realize that even though this may not be their job, they still have enough seniority and experience to provide a substantial amount of development to peers and juniors. Ideas vary about who in which position should develop others, and on what or how they should focus their time. According to operators, in practice, regardless of service or doctrine, if you are a leader on a team, it is your responsibility to professionally and personally develop your teammates.

Leaders are obligated to do both combat readiness and personal development. (O3E, SEAL)

Mentorship is given lip service sometimes. There is a need to quantify mentorship to evaluate it. It is incumbent on leaders to develop the future leaders. Sharing failures is vital for growth. (O6, SEAL)

In a platoon the dynamic is pretty tight and when new blood comes in it is imperative that someone brings the new guys under their wing and integrates them into the team. Make guys stronger and benefit from the

additional knowledge of the new member. It makes the whole group stronger. This initiative is a responsibility of the leadership. (E7, SEAL)

For the individuals on a team, the position of most importance is that of the Senior Enlisted Advisor (SEA). In our experience, the SEA not only runs operations, but is ultimately responsible for everyone else on the team, from the officer to the newest junior enlisted member. Again, while ideas vary on exactly how the SEA should develop his juniors, according to participants it is nonetheless his job.

My first chief didn't last long, he was fired. My second chief was saltier and more experienced and really included the AOICs in decision making. As the first chief was getting fired, he asked us AOICs if we felt or understood that it was his responsibility to develop the AOICs. We said yes that we understood that to be his responsibility. The second chief understood that responsibility. (O3, SEAL)

After training, the chief would bring us [the PLT leadership] into the room, tell us what he saw that day, how we would have preferred to see, etc. (O3, SEAL)

The Team Sergeant develops his team. The Team Leader is developed by the CO/SGM/TS all being on the same page on what is right for the TL. If you have a strong TS, then you wouldn't need the additional formal mentoring effort. (O4, Special Forces)

Team learning environments depend on the chief and OIC. (O3, SEAL)

## **G. KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS FOR DEVELOPMENT WITHIN SOF TEAMS**

Our analysis of respondents' comments regarding their experiences with SOF team dynamics and leaders suggests a number of key findings:

- Environments conducive to development are characterized by openness, trust, good leaders who support development programs and opportunities, and receive backing from higher echelons. JCETs or combat deployments provide settings in which there are reduced distractions, thus focusing the team better. Operators ultimately want a safe place to make mistakes and learn from them with honest feedback and leadership support.
- Ideal developers possess the right traits, attributes, and/or behaviors. They set positive examples, are caring and genuine, are humble, have competence and experience in their developpee's job or field, are personable and able/willing to listen, and provide honest feedback.



- Personality matters. Even the most experienced and talented individuals will be avoided if they are arrogant and/or unpersonable. In addition, SOF operators will avoid those who lack competence and experience, those who are toxic or cancerous, those who are not trustworthy, and those who are selfish.
- As expected, junior operators tend to lack humility and experience, but this is recognized and expected that they will grow and develop with adequate team time. According to participants, 41% of juniors lacked the right personal characteristics, 39% lacked the right professional characteristics, and 20% lacked an understanding of the operational environment.
- Team seniors are held to a higher (more accountable) standard than juniors because it is expected that they should have overcome some of the flaws inherent in juniors. Accordingly, some seniors have the competence and knowledge, but do not know how to adequately apply it to others' development. Some seniors do not think it is their position or place to develop others, or they do not care enough to do so.
- Some seniors are found lacking due to the post-9/11 pace of operations; guys have made it into leadership positions with less overall experience and knowledge than their predecessors. They are not as adept at developing others as they could or should be.
- Some Army seniors lack effective developmental characteristics due to the organizational structure of Special Forces. SF operators, albeit highly trained and operationally experienced, often do not have the same level of leadership responsibilities as their conventional Army peers.
- Team seniors have an inherent responsibility to develop others. Whether it is their position or not, if they have something to pass on, they should.
- Unity must exist among a team's leaders. The team gains its personality from its leaders. Leaders must support development and proactively push it within the team.
- The team's SEA is ultimately responsible for his team's development. The team chief has a hand in developing his officer(s) and is the primary developer of the rest of the men on the team.

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### **III. DEVELOPEE EXPERIENCES: THE SOF DEVELOPER, IN THE EYES OF THE DEVELOPEE**

The term developer is used to denote the person who is transferring knowledge, guidance, or development to the developpee through the developmental relationship. The developer in a SOF team is typically, though not always, the more experienced and senior person in a developmental relationship. In our participant population, the developer was often someone in a position of leadership, although developmental relationships did occur between peers and with those outside the chain of command. Participants were asked a range of questions to gather data regarding their experiences with a developer while on a SOF team (Questions 4–14, Appendix A).

#### **A. IDENTIFICATION OF A PREVIOUS DEVELOPER (Q4)**

The initial question posed to the participants asked: *Can you describe a person (or persons) who has helped to develop you?* Nearly all were able to describe a developer. Responses ranged from simply naming the person's title (Platoon Chief, Company Commander, etc.) to a detailed description of the developer's traits, characteristics, and actions. Most participants identified a person or persons who developed them at a key time as they entered into a new position or unfamiliar environment. Responses also indicate that development occurs, or is most needed, when individuals are seeking knowledge, acceptance, role models, and guidance.

A sample of the responses follows.

Going straight from a non-combat job to an ODA and to combat was kind of a culture shock. My first company commander wrote me off initially, he had a bad read on me because I had a different background than him. My second company commander kind of gave me a second chance or a second look beyond his predecessor's viewpoint. He gave me the confidence I needed and gave me free reign over my team. This taught me that background doesn't matter. (O4, SF)

He took care of his people and was the quintessential trainer and motivator. He had a strong work ethic and was the first to do anything. He

was the best leader I've ever seen. He knew how to handle any given situation. (E9, SEAL)

There was a major and gunny on my first team and since we were all new to a new SOF unit, we were all from different backgrounds and were all learning together. (O4, Raider)

He [developer] was methodical and micromanaged me at the onset to set the standards, expectations, roles, and responsibilities. He was the senior leader by experience even though we were the same rank. (E7, SEAL)

The B Team ops sgt took me under his wing; on the B Team initially, he showed me the ropes. Later, on a team, the [Captain/Team Leader (CPT/TL)] did a good job of thinking outside the box while deployed; tried to help affect the population instead of just shooting things, and to think about new problem sets. A later CPT/TL sat us younger guys down and helped us to understand the planning process at a higher level. (E7, Special Forces)

I was developed by other team members and my peers. I didn't have a very good company commander, but the battalion commander was good and is still my mentor today. (O5, Special Forces)

## **B. NOTABLE CHARACTERISTICS OF DEVELOPERS (Q6)**

As a follow-up question, respondents were asked: *What characteristics of that person(s) do you feel most contributed to your development?* Responses cited personal characteristics such as honesty, humility, fairness, trust, forthrightness, and the ability to be empathetic towards others. To a lesser degree, responses included work-related topics, such as leading by example, expert knowledge, and the ability to share experiences.

The following examples capture responses on this topic:

He was a very humble guy, had high standards for us. His drive to mentor us was based on his own previous experiences, mistakes he had made, lessons learned. (O3E, SEAL)

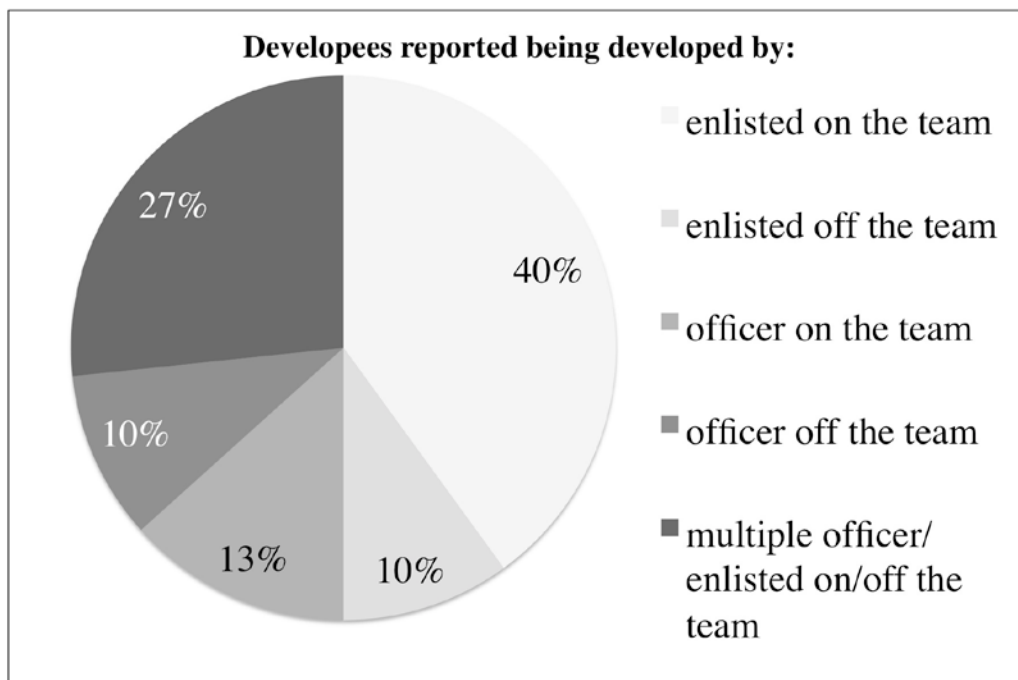
It was his tenacity to never lose and his sheer desire to lead from the front. He had the ability to make you want to follow him. To work for him became a privilege. (E9, SEAL)

He had a natural passion for teaching and mentorship. He must've spent previous time I think just contemplating our organization in general. He had a lot of insight on what makes a good ODA and how to be a team player. (E6, Special Forces)

### C. RELATIONSHIP TO THE DEVELOPER (Q5)

We then asked for demographic data in order to determine the developer's position in relation to the developpee. Of our respondents, 73% reported that someone within the team had developed them, indicating that some operators must seek development from outside the team and/or from multiple sources. Of those on the team who provided the development, 75% were enlisted and 25% were officers. Most of the enlisted developers had some level of experience and were usually in positions of leadership (e.g., Team Sergeant, Platoon Chief). A quarter of all participants reported receiving development from a combination of officers and enlisted. Because SOF officers have to simultaneously learn how to be SOF and also command and lead, they receive development from multiple people. Of the typical officers on teams, a quarter of them receive development purely from other officers, while the remaining majority are developed by primarily enlisted or a combination of enlisted and officers. A summary of our findings is represented in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Who Provided Development to Developpees



#### **D. INITIATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP (Q7)**

In our interviews we asked: *How did your developmental relationship/interaction begin?* Responses indicate that half of the time the relationships were initiated by the developer, 42% began mutually, and only 8% were initiated by the developpee. The relatively small number of times developpees initiated into a developmental relationship may reflect two dynamics. First, within SOF teams, the onus of responsibility to initiate is typically put on the senior person, whether he is in a position of leadership or not. Second, some junior personnel may be unwilling to ask for help or guidance for fear of seeming incapable, unable to do the job, or unsure of how the leadership will respond.

I had approached him [Team Sergeant] early on about being forthright, but it was some of both of us. We both knew that the TL/TS relationship was very important to the team. (O4, SF)

[My E7 peer] started it. As soon as I got to the team, he immediately took me on board. (E7, SEAL)

My first team chief handed me a book of notes/[standard operating procedures] on day 1. We butted heads initially, but eventually got it all worked out. (O4, Raider)

[My Platoon Chief] started it. At that rank (E5) we are a little nervous to initiate relationships. The leader should initiate. (E7, SEAL)

[My Troop Commander] drove it, had a set agenda. I was very impressed, I hadn't seen that before with officers. (O3E, SEAL)

Guys have to take active roles and be proactive. Mentorship is sometimes assumed. It makes a huge difference when a guy knows that someone is available to help them develop. (E7, SEAL)

The responsibility of mentoring goes on the senior, they have to foster that relationship. (O4, Special Forces)

#### **E. DEVELOPER FUNCTIONS (Q8)**

Respondents were then asked: *What did that person(s) do for you?* The rich nature of the responses to this question illustrates the multi-faceted roles played by developers on SOF teams. Respondents described their developers as being role models, coaches, teachers, mentors, and leaders who influenced them in their personal and

professional lives. According to respondents, developers played critical roles in enhancing their understanding of the SOF team environment and appreciating how to operate and lead. In addition, developers were noted for their influence on personal lives and in interactions outside of the team environment. Our data suggests that SOF developers have numerous functions; however, the common themes of role modeling (Kram, 1985), individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2010), acting as a sounding board for decision making, and empowerment were predominant.

### **1. Role model**

As a role model, the developer gave respondents a person to emulate and mirror themselves after. Role models were selected because they embodied traits that were desired and respected by interviewees at the time. Many of the respondents commented that as a role model, their developer(s) set the example and demonstrated through actions how to conduct oneself as an operator. These sentiments were often expressed by he “led by example” and “showed me what right looks like.” Often respondents would cite reputation as a factor that contributed to them choosing their developer as a role model. The characteristics of the role modeling function are consistent with the idealized influence component of transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2010) and Kram’s (1985) model of mentorship.

The following responses represent participants’ input regarding role modeling:

He would prioritize people first and was always patient with his interactions with peers and subordinates. The level of respect displayed by others towards him inspired me to adopt those qualities. (O1E, SEAL)

He made an early impression on me in my career. To me, he was the greatest guy in the world. (E7, SEAL)

He was the first to do anything and always led by example. (E9, SEAL)

He displayed what a Master Sergeant was supposed to be: professional, he expected a lot, he knew everything that was going on, and he set a solid example. (E7, SF)

Most of all, he led by example and showed me what “right” looks like. (O6, SEAL)

## **2. Individualized consideration**

Respondents were keen to note when a developer took the time to actively engage in the developmental process. When developers focused on an operator and provided individual coaching and feedback, it signified to the developpee that his role as a member of the team was important. In addition, the role of teaching undertaken by the developer involved the passing of both personal and work-related knowledge. For operators, the primary source of knowledge usually centered on tactical and operational skill sets. As most respondents thought back to when they were either new to a team or a new career position, a key interest of theirs was to learn the trade and establish competence. Effective developers were able to recognize this and provide the knowledge and information to developpees that they needed. Developers also provided a supportive climate in which developpees were encouraged to reach higher levels of potential (Bass & Riggio, 2010).

What follows is a sample of responses illustrating individualized consideration:

He [Platoon Chief] put in the time and energy and took me to a higher level that I didn't know existed. He showed me how much I don't know. (E7, SEAL)

He [Platoon OIC] shared his failures with us. He also took time with each person and got to know them. (E9, SEAL)

He took time to explain the "why" of something we did and provided an understanding of job practices and methods. (E7, SEAL)

The tactics E6 was in my squad, so he really tried to help me learn things since I would be the one on the radio with the OIC and Chief. (O3, SEAL)

The warrant provided me with knowledge I couldn't get through academic means. (O4, Special Forces)

He [peer E7] made me appreciate being a student of the game. He had this mindset of always progressing, always getting better and was able to relate this passion to others. (E7, SEAL)



### **3. Sounding board**

Developees also sought out developers in order to guide them through decision making. Commonly, effective developers provided sound feedback and constructive criticism regarding choices the developees made. Often times, developers were turned to help guide thought processes and provide decision making options. Developers who played a supportive and non-judgmental role while providing honest feedback in this process were highly valued by developees. These types of interactions fostered confidence and assured developees that they could make sound decisions in the SOF team environment.

Examples of respondents' comments follow:

My Team Sergeant was a sounding board. He was very forthright without putting you down. (O4, SF)

We held candid discussions, problem solving, counseling. He [E9] was an experienced sounding board and we were able to share experiences. (O1E, SEAL)

They were understanding, empathetic, they understood my place and position and provided constructive and helpful feedback. They weren't overly critical, not at all demeaning, provided options, and explained systems and processes. (O4, Special Forces)

They provided a sanity check on decisions, giving advice, they had more experience in how you should deal with people. (O4, Raider)

Give honest and corrective feedback, it's not about tearing someone down. How can you expose weakness to a person who is threatening? (E9, SEAL)

### **4. Empowerment**

An additional key function of developers discussed by respondents was that of empowerment. In most instances, the empowerment of developees allowed them to assume new responsibilities and challenges that furthered their understanding of their own capabilities. Empowering developees, especially with leadership responsibility, was one of the most highly regarded qualities in a developer. The most effective developers

also supported developpees by fostering an environment that was free from fear of failure. Failure, according to respondents, was a key element in the learning process.

The following comments illustrate participants' perceptions about empowerment:

For half the time we were deployed I was his subordinate but also technically my own mini-task force commander. He treated me somewhat as a peer; he gave me both guidance as a subordinate but also respect as a near-peer. He had picked me for that responsibility, but also let me figure it out. I could always call him up if needed. (O4, Special Forces)

The major gave a lot of leadership guidance. He let me make mistakes, so I could learn in a controlled environment. (O4, Raider)

He [Platoon OIC] trusted my ability to lead; empowered us. He didn't micromanage us and let us work our jobs. Would come to me if I needed help. (O4, SEAL)

Put us in challenging situations and allowed us to fail to learn valuable lessons. Forced us to critically think and solve problems. (E9, SEAL)

Empowered me to lead, make mistakes and learn from them. Whether I succeeded or failed, it was still an opportunity for growth. (O6, SEAL)

#### **F. TYPE OF SUPPORT GIVEN (Q9)**

In order to capture the purpose and nature of the relationship, we asked: *Did meaningful assistance consist of more career-oriented advice or more personal support?* A majority of the responses (67%) indicate that the relationship assisted with both personal and professional development. Twenty-nine percent reported relationships in which exclusively professional development occurred, while three percent reported exclusively personal development. There was little variation between the officer and enlisted populations, with just a small number of officers reporting some personal-only development when they were the developpee.

The type of support provided by developers largely depended on both the situation and the individuals in the relationship. At times, the situation would dictate whether or not the developpee required personal or professional development. In other instances, a developer reacted to a need he saw. In addition, a developpee may have asked for help/guidance in certain areas, thus establishing the basis for further personal or

professional development. For those relationships in which both personal and professional development occurred, the relationship would usually be founded for one reason and would then broaden. For example, a friendship would form and manifest itself as personal support and then grow to include professional and career-related development. Conversely, there were instances when professional development was the basis of a relationship which later grew to include personal support, eventually leading to friendship.

### **1. Personal development**

Personal development spanned many areas. We categorized personal development as involving topics outside of typical work processes. For instance, personal support might have to do with non-work relationships (e.g., spousal, family, community, etc.). Personal support and development usually led to greater self-confidence, friendship, self-efficacy, maturity, and overall growth as a person. Respondents, for example, indicated that role-modeling should be considered as a form of personal support. Respondents also indicated that personal support spilled over to professional support by helping them to become confident and establish their identity in the team setting.

The following responses typify operator opinions about personal development:

The Company Commander was more of a personal role model. The Battalion Commander and Team Sergeant both focused on systems and processes; the Battalion Commander showing me different options in the military, and the Team Sergeant helping me with my relationship to the team, when to speak up in certain situations, and to learn my place. (O4, SF)

The major provided both and we also became good friends. The gunny was much more professionally focused; we got along but didn't necessarily "bond." I was more personal with my second team's chief, but we didn't overdo it. (O4, Raider)

He [Platoon Chief] was my best friend and he would do anything for me. He was my pack leader and I considered him my Sensei. It was pure, unadulterated leadership. (E7, SEAL)

It [developmental relationship] was life changing. He taught me and fed me knowledge and showed me how to look at things through a different lens. (E7, SEAL)

He could see things I couldn't see in myself. (E7, SEAL)

Even though we've since gone our separate ways, I will always strive to be like him [Platoon Chief]. (E6, SEAL)

It [developmental relationship] was definitely personal. The personal transcends into the professional. (O4, Special Forces)

## **2. Professional development**

In this study, we use “professional development” to refer to career and work-related advice, mentoring, etc. that has contributed to an individual's development as an operator on a SOF team. Professional development often involved navigating the operational career field and adopting a proper “team guy” mindset. Developers who assisted in the career management of their developees and contributed to operational learning processes, were noted as making a substantial impact on professional development. Respondents also commented that professional development enabled them to become more capable and competent leaders on SOF teams.

The following comments exemplify respondents' feedback regarding professional development:

Both relationships were more professional than personal. Team Sergeant eventually became more personal. (O4, Special Forces)

Early on it was more career oriented. As time progressed it became a mix of both. (O6, SEAL)

It was a blend of both. He [Team Sergeant] carried himself, or was known by others as a respectful person, but didn't demand it. He gave guidance, he listened to people. He gave some professional stuff as well, like how to conduct yourself when working with host nation leaders (O4, Special Forces).

A bit of both. Mostly how to manage career and act in your professional life to make the organization better. He would provide me with opportunities for professional growth and pursuing my interests and goals. (O6, Special Forces)

Career direction, goal setting. Professional development. Helped me to gain respect from the guys by being an effective leader. (O4E, SEAL)

Provided a large amount of knowledge about the career and its possibilities. Opened doors that I didn't know were there. (E7, SEAL)

#### **G. VALUE OF DEVELOPMENT TO THE RESPONDENT (Q10)**

As a follow-up to what type of development was provided, we asked respondents: *On a scale of 1–5, was what was provided very beneficial or not very, with 1 being very beneficial?* Nearly everyone rated what was provided as beneficial, with an average score of 1.5 on the 1–5 scale. Of note, the lower rating (1.5) may imply that if someone were to receive a 5 (not beneficial), that individual would probably never have been mentioned as being influential in someone's development. Additionally, those new to teams might rate their development as beneficial because they might still be in "receive mode" and open to anything and everything that is offered.

Comparing officer and enlisted demographics, 82% of enlisted respondents rated their developer as a 1 (most beneficial), while officers only rated their developers a 1 58% of the time. We cannot explain the reason for this difference, though one consideration is that the average SOF officer we interviewed may have had more leadership time than did enlisted personnel, thus they may have had higher expectations for what should be given and received in developmental relationships. Though respondents were only asked to give a number rating of 1 through 5, some provided additional comments. For instance:

[Rating of 1] It was life changing, it influenced how I interacted with my own kids and family. (E7, SEAL)

[Rating of 1] Epiphanies happened through dialogue. (O1E, SEAL)

Master Sergeant from the B Team gets a 1 and the Captain a 2; he was trying too hard to manage the problem Team Sergeant, thus maybe lost sight of some other things for the greater team. (E7, Special Forces)

#### **H. THE MOST IMPORTANT ASPECT OF THE RELATIONSHIP (Q11)**

In our interviews, we asked: *What was the most important function/aspect of the relationship?* This question allowed respondents to specify what they valued most, or

what had the greatest impact on them. Many respondents provided answers that corroborated or repeated topics already discussed (e.g., role modeling, individualized consideration, empowerment, and serving or acting as a sounding board). Interviewees also cited the significance of trust, friendship, and mentorship:

There was trust, no secrets, no grudges. [My peer E7] set the task, condition, and standard. Expectations were clear. We felt united; he fundamentally reminded you to excel and be self-empowered. He was the person I chose to give me my foundation. I was striving to be like him. (E9, SEAL)

He interacted with others like a fellow human being. (O4, Special Forces)

I knew he always had my back and my interests at heart. I knew where I stood with him and was held accountable. I did not want to let him down. (E9, SEAL)

Showed me how to do my job as a SEAL. He gave me career advice, told me what next moves to make. He did things I wanted to emulate and strive to be like. A great example for me to follow. (O6, SEAL)

#### **I. TIME, EFFORT, AND LOCATION OF DEVELOPMENTAL INTERACTION (Q12)**

An additional question probed the setting and method of development, the timing and frequency of development, and the perceived level of devotion that the developer provided the developpee: *How much time and/or effort did that person provide you (frequency and length of interactions, level of perceived devotion/effort, communication/interaction, and setting/location)?* Tellingly, results are too varied for us to evaluate quantitatively. Settings varied. But, essentially, where work happened, development happened. Methods were typically face-to-face, but then as jobs changed, the relationship was maintained via phone or email. Most developpees report that their developers were fully devoted, but by how much and why varies. Respondents were often able to tell whether someone had a genuine interest or was merely “doing his duty.” Some relationships spanned years and, as operators moved to different operational units, the relationships endured, mostly on the basis of friendship. Other relationships persisted only for as long as they were needed. That is, the relationship ran its functional course and served its purpose until the purpose ended. This is likely a common theme for

developmental relationships on SOF teams, as personnel frequently move to different positions.

A sample of responses follows.

He's devoted, I've always had good Company Sergeants Major. The one now thinks if he takes care of you, you'll take care of him, so it's win win. (E8, Special Forces)

The Team Sergeant would go out of his way, made it his personal duty, it was heartfelt. The [commanding officer (CO)] was more about just doing his duty. (O4, Special Forces)

Both [Ops Sergeant and Captain] were very committed. It was good to have the Master Sergeant first, but bad because everyone else after didn't measure up. The Captain wanted us to see a bigger picture, and he's still focused on helping me as I transition out of the military. (E7, Special Forces)

We interacted daily, constantly, probably two hours a day total. He [Company Commander] knew that accomplishing the mission was making sure that I knew what I was doing to represent the team well. (O4, Special Forces)

Interaction was daily, a lot of sidebar conversations, sometimes over a beer. They [Teammates and Leaders] all deeply cared, would go above and beyond, they could've let me hang a couple of times, but didn't. (O4, Raider)

We [Major and Gunny] had daily contact. The teams were together constantly for years—whether training or deployed, we spent more time together than apart. We tried to do a lot of team events—PT, training, and bond through the shared misery of it. The major was 100% devoted, was one of the best leaders I've seen. The gunny was about 40% devoted to me, but by position was mostly focused on the development of the younger guys, which was understandable to a point. (O4, Raider)

It's been a 20 year relationship that has been intermittent but focused and engaged when interacting. (O6, SEAL)

We [Company Commander] communicated almost daily while deployed. It started with a work topic, but would lead to personal topics – workouts, music, he knew a lot about a lot of things. Settings, if not by phone, would be in his office or the team room. He would always stop and give his full attention. We still keep in touch now and it's more personal than professional now. (O4, Special Forces)

## **J. KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS FOR DEVELOPERS, FROM THE DEVELOPEE POV**

Our analysis of respondents' comments regarding their experience with a developer suggests a number of key findings:

- The personal attributes and personality characteristics of developers are key foundational elements for the developmental relationship. Operators consistently stressed the importance of honesty, humility, fairness, trust, forthrightness, and empathy as traits they most valued in their developers. These attributes facilitated the initial formation and growth of the relationship. In addition, the stronger these elements were, the more impactful the relationship was.
- Most of the development in a team setting comes from its senior enlisted members and those with team experience. Enlisted members are most often developed by other enlisted on the team. Officers, on the other hand, are developed by both enlisted and officer.
- Developers initiated relationships with their developees more often than did developees. Junior personnel on a team are perhaps more reserved and reticent to approach others for developmental needs out of fear of seeming incapable or to be a weak member of a team. In addition, operators who are new to the team setting or an operational environment may not know what it is they are lacking, and therefore do not know what to ask for.
- Developers were seen to provide four primary functions to developees:
  - Role modeling
  - Individualized consideration
  - Acting as a sounding board for decision-making processes
  - Empowerment

Worth noting is that these functions are consistent with elements found in the existing literature of mentorship (Kram, 1985) and transformational leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2010). We will refer to these four primary functions periodically in acronym form (R.I.S.E.).

- The developmental relationship offered both personal and professional support to 67% of operators in our sample. However, some relationships were exclusively professional and related only to work issues and career guidance (true for 29% of respondents, and officers reported they were more likely to engage in developmental relationships for professional and career guidance purposes than personal reasons). Even so, what our



numbers reveal is that the nature of the amount of time spent together on a SOF team facilitates the formation of more intense personal interactions than those found in a typical military or business setting. These findings point to a key difference when it comes to existing literature.

- Operators were able to draw clear distinctions about the nature of the development they received. Those who saw their developers as merely “doing their duty” or “going through the motions” did not value the relationships as much as did those who were developed by individuals who invested considerable effort. This indicates that any measures put in place by leadership to influence developmental relationships hinge on their needing to be genuine and focused in nature.

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#### **IV. DEVELOPER EXPERIENCES: THE SOF DEVELOPER, IN HIS OWN WORDS**

Developmental relationships always need to be examined from both the point of view of the recipient of development, and from the provider of that development. This chapter will concentrate on developers' views. We asked participants who they developed, what kind of development they provided, and how effective they thought it was (Questions 15–28, Appendix A).

##### **A. IDENTIFYING A DEVELOPEE (Q15)**

To gauge participants' experiences, we asked: *When on a team, do you feel that you helped to personally or professionally develop others?* Most respondents reflected back to a time when they were in a leadership position on a team (Team Leader, Team Sergeant, Platoon OIC, Platoon Chief). Some of the more junior operators plainly felt they did not have as much to offer, and/or were still busy learning themselves. Many said they waited to develop others until they felt they had established themselves either experientially or with personal confidence. The vast majority, however, responded that they had developed another and at least tried to build up the team and contribute a positive growing atmosphere for the organization. Many named one or two specific individuals for whom they tried to provide focused development.

The following are statements representative of participants' responses:

It wasn't a focused effort. More attention was paid to those who needed it. The one who got special attention was because he "needed" it. In a SEAL Platoon, the E6s do the most teaching, coaching, mentoring. (O3, SEAL)

No, not really. I just got my first junior, but I haven't really had much influence on him yet. I've always been the junior, or the equivalent of one of the juniors. (E6, Special Forces)

I tried to look for the guys who were getting ready to move on to a position of further responsibility. My 18F was senior, he ended up going warrant, but I figured at the time he was preparing to become a team sergeant. My young 18E I could tell wanted to know more about how

team-level things worked. I focused on guys who could use the exposure of team business. (O4, Special Forces)

Yes, I developed the junior echo. It was like trying to bottle the Tasmanian Devil. (E7, Special Forces)

My first two platoons I was still in learning mode. When I was OIC I began to mentor more. I took extra time in my OIC tour and later in career helped other officers. (O6, SEAL)

I tried to help others feel like they were part of the team, but I didn't fully feel comfortable trying to develop someone else yet. I made the assumption that they had the same training as me, so they should be capable. (E7, Special Forces)

When I was on a team, I'm not sure if I was self-aware. I was looking at myself a lot and worried about performing adequately. It wasn't until my company commander position that I had more of a grasp on the big picture. I now had experience to impart (O6, Special Forces).

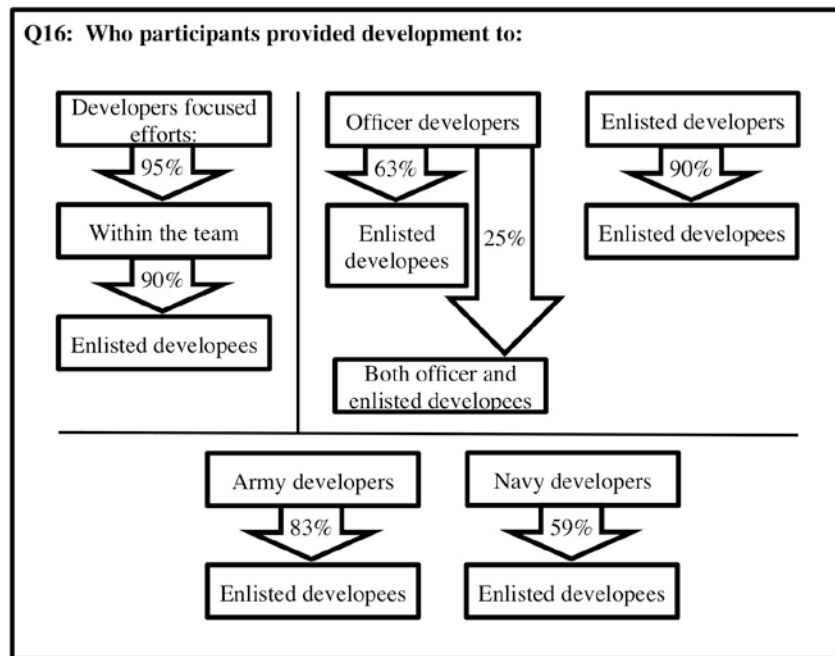
Yes. I modeled myself after positive leaders and used their attributes. I learned how to do it from others. (E9, SEAL)

## **B. WHO THEY DEVELOPED (Q16)**

Participants were asked to provide information about the person(s) they developed. We categorized the responses into officer and enlisted, and whether the recipient was on or off the team. Overall, 95% focused their development on someone on their team and 90% of those receiving development were enlisted (Figure 2). Due to the nature of teams working as autonomous units, it makes sense that nearly all development is focused within the team.

Subtle differences do exist between the Army and Navy and between officers and enlisted. Of note, Navy developers focused more of their development on officers than developers in the Army did. This is likely the result of a typical SEAL platoon having more junior officers than an SFODA.

Figure 2. To Whom Participants Provided Development



### C. WHO INITIATED (Q18)

Participants who provided development were then asked: *How did the developmental relationship/interaction begin?* According to respondents, 73% indicated that they had initiated the development themselves, 20% had a hand in it along with the developpee, and in only 7% of the cases did they say the developpee initiated the relationship. These figures may reinforce the notion that development providers either have more to offer due to their experience levels contrast, and/or because they are in leadership positions they take it upon themselves to reach out to junior operators. Also, as previously noted, some more junior personnel may have been apprehensive about asking for guidance or help for fear they would be seen as incapable or a weak team member.

I started [the developmental relationship]. It is important to start the relationship, be engaged, know the guys, to make myself known, who I am as an operator and person. (E8, SEAL)

I tried to intentionally push some things down, but on occasion I would get the pull from someone. (O4, Special Forces)

I tried to be proactive but sometimes needs and issues I was not aware of came up. We have to be proactive, cannot get caught up in ourselves. (E7, SEAL)

The prior-service guy did not approach me, he thought “he was good” but as time went on he was not progressing like the rest of the team. Others sought out both the leaders and their peers for things they needed help on. (O4, Raider)

I started it. I ask questions to get a gauge on them. Learn about who they are (family, interests, goals, etc.). (E9, SEAL)

#### **D. WHY INITIATED (Q19)**

Our research also sought to identify the factors that influenced developers to take an interest in another’s development: *What prompted you to take a more focused approach in that person’s development?* We categorized the responses into four themes. First, the developer acted as a result of the developpee needing help or displaying a deficiency in a certain area. Second, the developer took action as an assumed duty congruent with his position. Third, developers were motivated as a result of their own past experiences being developed by someone. Here it is worth noting that both good and bad experiences served as motivating factors. This brings us to number four: the developer cared for his developpee’s well-being and/or the well-being of the team itself and therefore initiated the relationship. Respondents also cited a combination among these reasons for why they choose to develop someone else.

The following represent participants’ responses:

##### **1. Identified need for development**

I saw he had a gap in military experience but had great potential. (O4, Special Forces)

I noticed a lack of ability and forced him to be engaged by keeping up with the high standards that I set. (O1E, SEAL)

As a whole they fell behind the progression of the other team members. (O4, Raider)

He was good at all the boat stuff, but was a little rough around the edges on other things. (O3E, SEAL)

The person [E5] was struggling and underdeveloped as an operator. He was lacking maturity, needed help, and just wasn't ready but we didn't give up on him. We set up an opportunity for him to develop and he returned to the operational platoon and was extremely successful. (E9, SEAL).

His life experience drew me in because he had more than I, but he needed a military mentor. (O4, Special Forces)

## **2. Positional duty**

They fell underneath me so I had to. And since they weren't doing what I would do—they were meandering—so I got after them. (E8, Special Forces)

It was the nature of the job; I thought it was expected of me. (O4E, SEAL)

## **3. Past experience**

I implemented a lot that was passed down from my mentor. (E7, SEAL)

I feel like I didn't get enough of it [development]. I didn't know how to seek guidance. I didn't take enough advantage of it. There was my opportunity to right a wrong. (O4, SEAL)

My mentorship experience gave me reason to pass it on. I owe it to someone else also. (E7, SEAL)

I've had NCOs who have done the little things for me and it makes a big difference. So I wanted to try and be the same guy, someone they could count on. (E7, Special Forces)

I wanted to take the mistakes I made and turn them into something positive. (O6, Special Forces)

## **4. Care**

I felt it was important to be engaged. What's paramount is that we operate as a fully functional SEAL team. (E7, SEAL)

I wanted to help people fit into the organization as a whole. (O6, Special Forces)

I want the Teams to be the Teams. I want to develop guys. I want to keep them alive. (E7, SEAL)

The importance of giving back was always in the back of my mind. (O6, SEAL)

I wanted to provide perspective. When you think you're by yourself, especially when you literally are in Afghanistan, it's important to think you're part of a bigger machine, to see the bigger picture, to know what the purpose is for being here. (O5, Special Forces)

#### **E. IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS TO EMBODY (Q17)**

In addition to asking participants who they developed and why, we asked: *What characteristics did you think were important for you to embody?* Respondents reflected on the actions and character traits they believed would make them most effective while developing others. Many of the characteristics cited by participants were consistent with notable characteristics displayed by those who had developed them. Common characteristics that marked developers were patience, empathy, trust, and loyalty. In addition, developers tried to model behavior that was consistent with role modeling, individualized consideration, empowerment, and acting as a sounding board. Whether by intuition or by design, those who were developing others knew that adopting these traits would be conducive to a successful developmental relationship.

The following examples capture responses on this topic:

Be a good dude. Loyalty is huge. Think about others. Be loyal to the platoon. Teach the universals like admin and operational skills. It's more than just work related. Have conversations with them, take care of them. Physical and non-physical training. (E7, SEAL)

The same thing I heard as a lieutenant, to set the example, to be the example, to put forth max effort to better the team and myself. I held myself to a very high standard, to show the team the example, but not necessarily to push it on them. (O4, Raider)

Have some humility, there's always something to learn. My Company Commander once brought in an E4 generator mechanic to help us with a generator problem; he helped fix a battalion-wide problem. This taught me that you can learn from anyone. (O4, Special Forces)

Being open with my guys, explaining decisions made to help guys grow personally and professionally [sounding board function]. Have thick skin and be open to criticism. Intrusive and involved, address issues, let them know you care. (E8, SEAL)



Take an interest, lead by example, don't be judgmental, give people time, be approachable, positive minded, active listener, and have integrity. (O3E, SEAL)

1. Leave your ego outside. 2. Leave the organization better than you found it. 3. Replace yourself with talent that is better than you. This third point is where mentorship fits in [referring to grooming and preparing future leaders]. Be humble. Make people excited about going to work. Counsel people properly. Recognize that guys can still do great things even after they make mistakes. (O6, Special Forces)

Empathy. It's easy to sit back and look down on people when they make mistakes. See how they view things, I could see how they were living day to day. (E9, SEAL)

I modeled the behavior after my own mentor. I protect them and was tough when necessary. I would appreciate and work for those under me while doing my best to empower them. (E7, SEAL)

## **F. FUNCTIONS PROVIDED TO DEVELOPEES**

Respondents were then asked: *What do you do for the person(s) you develop?* Responses reflected: role modeling (Kram, 1985), individualized consideration (Bass & Riggio, 2010), acting as a sounding board, and empowerment (R.I.S.E.).

### **1. Role model**

Interviewees often stressed the importance of carrying themselves according to the standard they wished others to meet. Common phrases throughout the interviews were "lead by example" and "set the standard." For example:

I was leading by example and made sure to set high standards. Through my actions I forced guys to keep up. (O1E, SEAL)

You are answerable to your guys, you have to take care of them and set standards. (E8, SEAL)

I made sure to take an interest and lead by example. (O3E, SEAL)

I lead by example and try to carry myself professionally both on and off duty. You have to exhibit professionalism, attention to detail, and excellence in all fields. (O6, SEAL)

That which you allow in your presence becomes the standard. (O3E, SEAL)

## **2. Individualized consideration**

An important role for developers to play is to impart knowledge and lessons learned from their experiences. For some, this came in the form of personal advice and counseling regarding issues outside of the team environment. Others spent time advising about job options and goal setting in order to help developees align potential career choices with their individual ambitions. Others made sure to proactively engage with what their developees were learning in order to ensure that they would become more capable team members. Though special operators attend numerous schools, it is often incumbent on those who are senior to pass working knowledge down to those who are less experienced.

Examples of statements follow:

You have to take a personal interest in their future plans. I would develop a career and personal short and long term plan. Find out what motivates them/directs them. Then you can enable them to unleash their max potential. If you don't take time, you'll just be talking at them. (E7, SEAL)

I know it's my job to give back. I take great pride in taking the time with juniors and helping them learn from my mistakes. (O6, SEAL)

I took an active interest in trying to help them out, especially while preparing for OEF-A. Mostly encouraged them to understand they had limitless options for their teams, in pursuing training options, understanding the Battalion Commander's priorities, and what was important to him at the time. (O4, Special Forces)

I wanted to remind them of the nature of the job and its expectations. I was developing a dude so he can kill and not be killed: I want the guys to come back alive. (E7, SEAL)

I tried to show them personal attention, to show them they could work with me and trust me. (O4, Raider)

I made them read and educate themselves, gave them some things to focus their self-education on. We spent time on a daily basis, to see what and how they were doing. (O4, Raider)

It was key to help them not make same mistakes I did. I would teach critical thinking skills and help them make decisions. More than just the tactical point of view [referring to big picture]. (O6, Special Forces)

Tactics, teaching fundamentals of the job. More importantly, big picture stuff like health, fitness, relationships. (E7, SEAL)

I called it non-physical training. It was about getting smarter about the battlefield without being on the battlefield. These guys have to learn how to manage, further their craft and trade. Read, gain knowledge and train. I wanted guys to become smarter operators. (E7, SEAL)

### **3. Sounding board**

Developers also acted as sounding boards for their developpees by providing decision-making advice and counsel. Developers might offer professional or personal advice, or both. For instance:

Show them the decision-making process. Blind obedience is not for guys like us [SOF]. [Leaders] have to train them and teach them to make decisions. (E7, SEAL)

Be an ear, but not necessarily a friend, listen, provide advice, give different ways to approach a problem. (O4, Special Forces)

I listened critically and shared my decision-making thoughts. (O4, Special Forces)

I protected them, listened, provided counsel, I wanted to be a confidant. You've got to hear what's going on in the platoon, take a personal interest, be open about helping others. It makes me feel good because I'm seen as being trusted and willing to give advice and help. You have to go above and beyond to do it right. (E9, SEAL)

### **4. Empowerment**

Finally, developers also performed actions related to empowerment by providing opportunities for developpees to assume new responsibilities and opportunities for increased authority. Developers often recognized the transitional nature of their leadership positions and desired to empower those in their charge to be successful when they left.

Here are some responses that point to empowerment:

In my mind I wanted to be the team leader who could be replaceable. I was trying to work myself out of a job, not be the guy where the team collapsed in a certain area because I wasn't there. I tried to disseminate responsibility. (O4, Special Forces)

Build their self-confidence. Have them take responsibility. Trust them. Give them enough rope and teach them to ask for help. (O3E, SEAL)

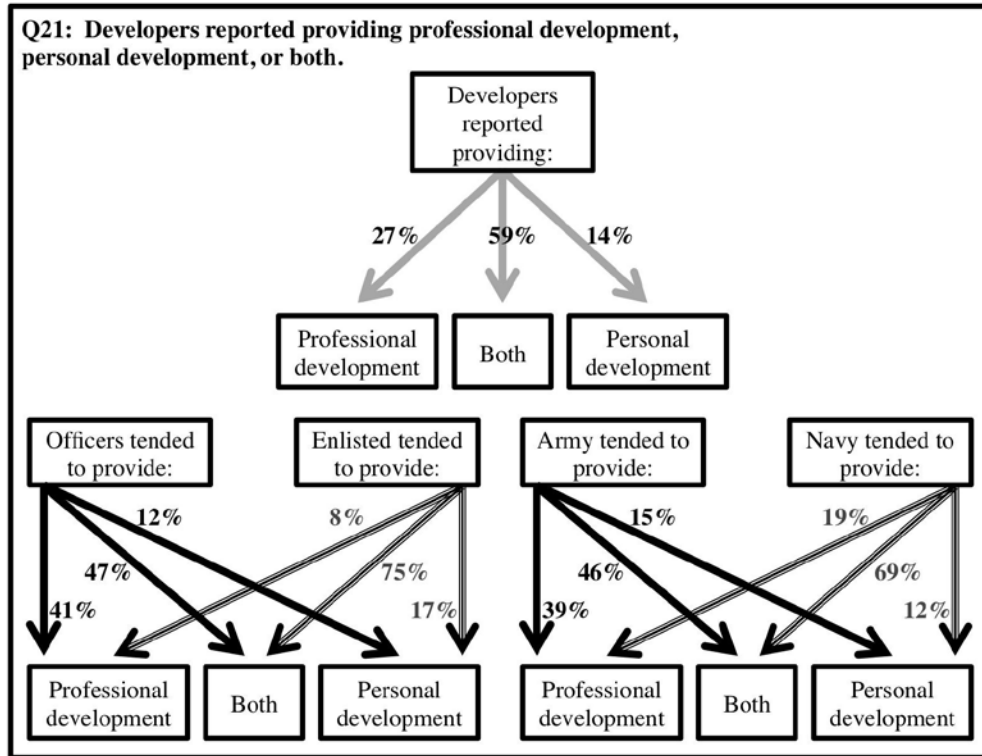
You have to put them in a position to make an impact. (O6, Special Forces)

Empower them. Then be sure to ask "what do you need" to support them. (E7, SEAL)

## **G. PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT (Q21)**

In asking development providers about their experiences developing juniors, we also sought to assess what kind of development was given. We asked respondents: *Do you offer more career-oriented advice or more personal support?* Figure 3 summarizes the data we collected. Of note, Army respondents indicated they focused on professional-only development twice as much as Navy respondents with both services providing both personal and professional development most of the time. The differences may be attributable to the fact that most Army respondents were officers and there is a tendency for officers to provide more professional-only development. Based on our experience, the difference between officers and enlisted might stem from officers being more mission driven whereas enlisted leaders are more personnel focused. However, further studies in this area are required to better explain these differences.

Figure 3. What Developers Provided



A sample of respondents' answers includes:

[I focused on] both. Personal and professional development “bleed over” into one. Strong relationships are forged in the platoon setting and both types of support manifest in that arena. Shared personal experiences allow us to grow professionally. (O1E, SEAL)

[I did] everything. It must be both personal and professional support. (E8, Special Forces)

[Advice I offered was] more career-professional. On the personal side, we were the same age....so he was as set in his ways as I was in mine. (O3E, SEAL)

[What I provided was] absolutely professional. I know the “interpersonal” stuff sounds like personal support, but interpersonal is a professional skill for a Green Beret. (O4, Special Forces)

[I provided] both. Hard to separate personal life from work life. It's 50/50. Sharing personal lessons. Dealing with career and deployment expectations. I want to be your friend, but business comes first. I wanted to show strength and leadership, but also to be engaged. I spent time

sharing “life experience,” and failures that I learned from and used them as teaching examples. (E7, SEAL)

I focused on personal stuff. Set the character first, the professional follows. (O4, Special Forces)

#### **H. RATING OF DEVELOPMENT GIVEN (Q22)**

After specifying whether the development they engaged in was more personal or professional, developers were asked to rate themselves on how beneficial they thought the development they offered was. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being most beneficial, and 5 being least beneficial, respondents averaged a rating of 2. When we compare this to how they rated the development they received—which they rated previously as, on average, 1.5—it is interesting that developers rated themselves lower. Perhaps interviewees were being (or wanted to seem) humble. Alternatively, maybe they found themselves reflecting during the interview process about areas in which they did not perform as well as they would have liked. This may be why a number of developers added the comment of “I could have done better.”

#### **I. JUDGING THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE DEVELOPMENT PROVIDED (Q23)**

Participants were asked: *How can you tell that you were effective (or not) in that person’s development?* We categorized the responses according to whether developers received verbal feedback, an effect was observed, they reported a combination of both, or they could not answer conclusively. Fifty-two percent said they observed an effect; 8% said they received verbal feedback, such as “thank you”; 33% responded with a combination of both, and 7% were inconclusive about their effectiveness. Due to the daily interaction of operators on a team, observing an effect seems likely in most situations. Many times developers were able to see the effects of their development rather quickly; however, development also occurred over a span of time for some. This may be because progress was not recognized by the recipient until sometime later. A simple “thank you” let the developer know that what he did was valuable and appreciated, which may reflect gratitude for effort more so than the effectiveness of development. Though

some did not receive immediate verbal feedback, it was always appreciated whenever it was given.

Participants' comments regarding their ability to gauge their effectiveness follow:

They're not getting in trouble, they get promoted, which reflects the good NCOERs that I write, which is what they earn by their actions. (E8, Special Forces)

Their understanding increased and their performance did as well. I got thanked. Feedback is great; you want to know you are helping others. (E7, SEAL)

They all expressed thanks for the self-education. They seemed genuinely happy to see me during later reunions, which came as a surprise to me a little. They told me some of the personal things they had learned. (O4, Raider)

Sometimes we don't know in real time if we are influencing others. (O6, Special Forces)

The person changed and became a resource of knowledge for others. Command recognition, career advancement, higher self-esteem. (O1E, SEAL)

#### **J. TIME/FREQUENCY AND LEVEL OF EFFORT OF DEVELOPMENTAL INTERACTIONS (Q24)**

Participants were asked: *How much time and/or effort did you provide that person(s)?* Responses ranged from periodic episodes as required by command policy (counseling and evaluations) to unstructured and dependent on the needs of the developpee or initiative of the developer. Some answers suggested that developers' engagement was purely needs-based or issue driven. Others noted that their level of engagement was consistent throughout a period of time and they pursued development intensively. Some of the factors that respondents cited for limiting their engagement were job responsibilities and other work priorities that they deemed more important to the team at the time.

Comments summarizing participants' input follow:

I put my total absolute max effort. I taught those guys a lot. I know I put all my heart into it but there is always room to improve. I could have done

stuff better. Overall, I feel that I gave them a good mindset for being in the teams. (E7, SEAL)

It may sound like B.S. but it's 100%. There has to be open collaboration, especially in SF. (O5, Special Forces)

I felt fairly committed. I felt the team could only be as successful as the effort we put in, or I had the "ideal" of a certain level of trust and would commit my time accordingly. (O4, Special Forces)

I tried to talk and counsel with them at least once a month—per the [United States Marine Corps' (USMC)] counseling guidelines. The settings were 1-on-1, private, whatever was comfortable for them, which at times could be at the pull-up bars, which wasn't as ideal for me. Per my wife I was too devoted, it was always mission first, Marine always. I pushed and dedicated myself to ensure they were ready personally and professionally for our job. (O4, Raider)

#### **K. RECOGNITION OF DEVELOPMENT (Q28)**

We additionally asked respondents: *In a situation in which you developed someone else, did they realize you were attempting to help them develop?* We heard a range of responses indicating that, at times, the developpee was unaware of the intent and purpose of the interaction. Others said that the purpose was absolutely clear. Some also indicated that they were unsure whether their developpees were aware of what was happening at the time. These responses tell us that there is a bit of a gray area involved if developpees do not recognize when intentional development is taking place. For instance:

Initially they didn't understand....Over time they figured it out though. (E9, SEAL)

Yes, definitely. Guys say they appreciate your efforts; of course you can't be too overbearing with men your own age, you need to couch things properly. (O4, Special Forces)

I'm not sure if they always knew development was taking place. (E7, SEAL)

I think so, some were quicker than others, some were like kids, but others realized we were going out of our way, some eventually realized later on. (O4, Raider)



## **L. KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS FOR DEVELOPERS, FROM THE DEVELOPER POINT OF VIEW**

Our analysis of respondents' comments regarding their experiences as developers suggests a number of key findings:

- Operators often feel they need to gain in experience and confidence before developing others. For some, their primary focus was to complete the objectives and requirements of their position. It was not until they felt comfortable with their individual ability as operators that they would then take time to develop others.
- Most of the development on a SOF team is directed at the enlisted. A larger portion of Navy participants reported developing officers. This may be due to the fact that the typical SEAL officer enters the community at the rank of O1 and immediately interacts with special operators. In contrast, an SF officer will do his initial time in a conventional Army unit before completing training and being assigned to an ODA as an O3.
- A majority of developmental relationships begin with the developer initiating (73%). Participants felt that it was their responsibility as leaders, or as those more senior with more experience, to seek out others to develop. Because developees were less likely to initiate, there may be instances in which developmental interactions were missed.
- Four themes were consistent among developers for reasons why they initiated the relationship:
  - They identified a need for development in another.
  - They felt it was their positional duty.
  - They were motivated by their own past experience (good and bad).
  - They cared for the individual and/or the team.
- Developers felt that it was important for them to embody certain traits in order to be most effective in developing others. Participants often referenced trust, patience, empathy, and loyalty. Commonalities were seen with these traits and those that they most valued in operators that developed them. Once again, these characteristics were key in establishing the developmental relationship.
- Developers provided the four functions of role modeling, individualized consideration, acting as a sounding board for decision making, and empowerment (R.I.S.E.). These are consistent with the functions provided to them by their own developers.

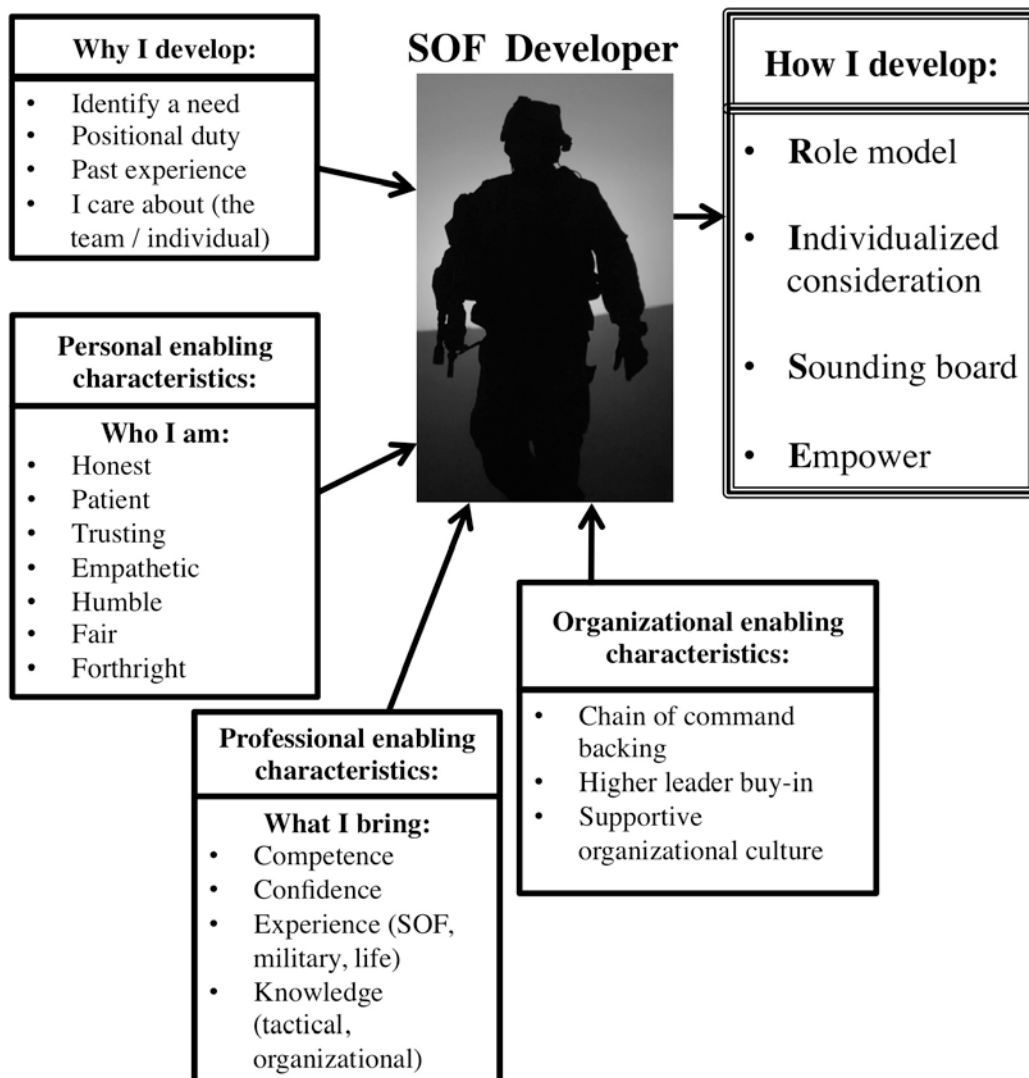
- Participants provided both professional and personal development to their developpees. Some differences were noted between officers and enlisted. Officers tended to provide more professional development whereas enlisted were more likely to provide both personal and professional development. This may be due to officers' tendency to be more career focused and mission oriented during day to day operations in a team environment.
- To determine whether they were providing effective development, developers either observed changed behavior or received verbal acknowledgement (e.g., "thank you"). Most participants took pride in positive changes they were able to see in their developpees such as: increased professional competencies, enhanced interpersonal and team relationships, and a decrease in deficiencies in those areas. However, at times developers were uncertain whether they were successful, which made them either doubt their abilities or their developpees'.

## **V. MODELS OF DEVELOPMENT, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS, AND CONCLUSIONS**

### **A. MODELS OF DEVELOPMENT**

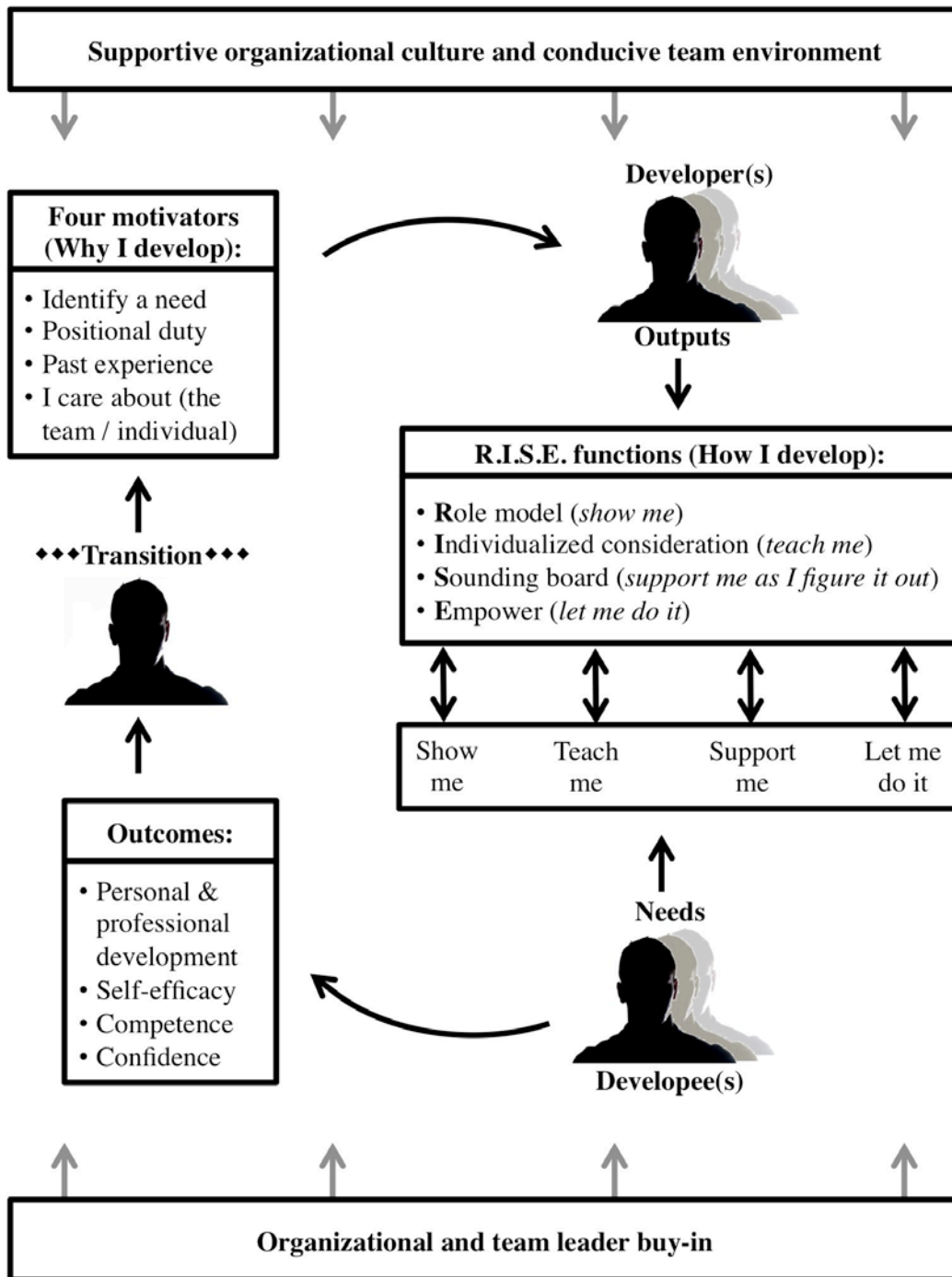
We developed two models to represent our findings regarding the SOF developer. The first model (Figure 4) illustrates the key personal, professional, and organizational inputs that enable the developer to provide the four R.I.S.E. functions (“How I develop” in Figure 4). Organizational enabling characteristics include: the unit chain of command having the back of the operator, proactive leader support and buy-in of development, and an organizational culture that prioritizes the personal and professional development of its operators. A more detailed description of the R.I.S.E. functions and the motivations for developing were discussed in Chapters Three and Four.

Figure 4. R.I.S.E. Model of Developer Functions



Our second model (Figure 5) represents the cyclical nature of the developmental relationship as it exists within the ideal supportive organizational culture and conducive team environment with leader backing. Beginning with the four motivators, the developer proactively chooses to meet the needs of his developpee(s) and provides one or more of the four R.I.S.E. functions. The outcomes of these interactions take form as: personal and professional development, self-efficacy, competence, and confidence. At a certain point in a career, opportunities will arise when a developpee transitions into the role of being a developer. This transition, we believe, is when leader, organizational, and environmental influences are vital in shaping the potential effectiveness of the future developer. This transition stage might occur as a matter of personal choice or it might come with the expectations of one's position or rank. It is important to note that while a person may become a developer of others, he is still likely a developpee of someone else.

Figure 5. The Developer Cycle



## **B. IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE SOF COMMUNITY**

Many of our key findings were summarized at the end of each chapter. Here we identify the implications of three themes that surfaced in our interviews.

### **(1) Theme 1 (SOF leaders) and implications**

SOF team leaders play a critical role in creating and facilitating developmental relationships. Leaders influence organizational culture and the expectations of the operators on the team. Good leaders are life changing in positive ways and empower those around them to create a trusting team environment in which development thrives. Poor leaders and those who do not have a vision for developing their team members miss opportunities when development could (and should) have taken place. The influences positive leaders have can last a lifetime. Unfortunately, the same holds true for bad or ineffective leaders.

***Recommendation 1:*** Train and educate leaders about how to create and support environments for developmental relationships conducive to developmental relationships at multiple levels throughout the organization.

***Recommendation 2:*** Implement mechanisms to evaluate leaders' ability to create environments that support the development of their operators. This can be done by modifying existing evaluation criteria for promotion or by developing entirely new methods. Seeking active feedback from former subordinates is essential in taking this action.

***Recommendation 3:*** Since you cannot force team leaders to care about others' development, it is important to continue to screen and prepare leaders in order to ensure only the highest quality enter into these positions. Otherwise, organizations will suffer sub-par operator and junior leader development.

### **(2) Theme 2 (Awareness) and implications**

Many operators lack awareness about the specific mechanisms in developmental relationships that foster personal and professional development. Often times a clear

understanding of developmental relationships comes at a later stage in one's career when operational time on a team is nearing its end or is long past. In addition, some operators in leadership positions are unaware of how to effectively influence and develop others, and do not know or recognize when it is appropriate for them to do so.

***Recommendation 1:*** Focused developmental/mentoring education could be provided at career professional development milestone schools over the course of one's career. For SEALs this would be: Seal Qualification Training (SQT), Leadership Continuum (LPO, LCPO), Troop Leaders Course, Instructor Qualification Course. For Army SF this would be: SFQC, BNCOC, and ANCOC. For the USMC this would be: Sergeants Course and/or Career Course. This education would help operators identify how they can provide and seek develop from their teammates, and be based on the findings represented in Figures 4 and 5. Exposure to focused development and mentoring should be consistent with the career stage of individuals at the time, and should be designed to support operators in developing themselves and others.

***Recommendation 2:*** Mentorship from outside an individual's immediate chain of command could be offered to juniors initially to assist them with transitioning to team life. This needs to be a person who would provide guidance that is consistent with the vision of the organization and the team's leadership. This developer would be another resource, were the developpee interested, to provide additional insights and help the operator gain awareness of developmental relationships early in his career.

### **(3) Theme 3 (Team SEA) and implications**

According to participants from all services and ranks, the team Senior Enlisted Advisor (SEA) is the person most responsible for developing his team. He plays a critical role in developing the officers and everyone else on the team. He is the backbone, *the* personality, and the individual viewed as the leader of the team.

***Recommendation:*** The team chief must absolutely be the "right guy." SEAs should not be chosen simply to fill a billet. A modified but simple 360 degree evaluation-like method could be used to ask all prior teammates: "We are considering Chief Smith for Team Chief in the near future, would you support him? Why/Why not?" While it may



be impossible to accurately screen out all sub-par leaders, the detrimental effects of a poor Platoon Chief or Team Sergeant will handicap his team and the individuals growing up on it.

### **C. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CONTINUED ACADEMIC RESEARCH IN THIS AREA**

The process of interviewing SOF operators about their developmental experiences proved invaluable. The qualitative responses we elicited shed important light on the topic, but our quantitative analysis was limited by the numbers involved, specifically in the population subsets. Further work on this topic remains to be done. Follow-on research could benefit from the application of more quantitative methods, which would require a larger pool of participants.

Interestingly, we found in our discussions and analysis that many junior operators lacked a conscious awareness or full understanding of the nature of their developmental relationships. In addition, even many of the seniors had not given the matter much thought until after they had left the team. The implication here is that conducting a survey of hundreds of E6–E7s would likely provide useful data, but that surveying a higher percentage of those who are in the E7/8 and O3 pool would yield even more because these are the individuals in positions most directly involved with leading men, managing personalities, and developing subordinates. The lack of awareness of development among operators could be due to a gap in the organizational culture and may be explored further with future research.

Ideally, a more thorough study of SOF development would involve surveys that solicit open-ended responses numbering in the hundreds to ensure that each sub-population is sufficiently represented to support statistical analysis. Such a study should also include Air Force Special Operations Command (AFSOC) operators (Combat Controllers and Pararescue Jumpers). Focus groups could help generate additional material on key topics. Best of all would be longitudinal research to assess patterns over time as individuals make career and PCS moves.

Our thesis data and conclusions are based on an all-male sample of interviewees. Additional studies in the future will be needed to examine whether and how the nature of developmental relationships will change as women enter SOF units. Follow-on studies of this nature will be critical to ensuring that developmental relationships on SOF teams remain effective.

#### **D. CONCLUSION**

Special operations forces are but one piece of the collective U.S. military apparatus. SOF teams are only as capable as the operators who compose them and the leaders who oversee them. Because we care about the Teams, and want to help make them more effective, we focused on personal and professional development. As evidenced from the data collected, SOF operators overall crave effective personal and professional development to help them grow and succeed in the community. Leaders and those who are senior on the teams have a responsibility to proactively and effectively engage in developing their juniors and subordinates. Informal settings work best for this in special operations. Yet, an open and supportive command is essential for development programs and relationships to flourish on the teams. Bottom line, too, is that operators and leaders who develop each other are capable of achieving stronger teams and more effective outcomes in executing missions and developing future operators.

Over the years, leaders and members of the SOF community have come to understand five “truths” regarding special operations forces:

1. Humans are more important than hardware.
2. Quality is better than quantity.
3. Special Operations Forces cannot be mass produced.
4. Competent Special Operations Forces cannot be created after emergencies occur.
5. Most Special Operations require non-SOF assistance (USSOCOM, 2012).

It is no accident that the first truth centers on the importance of the human element in SOF. In his SOCOM 2020 vision, Admiral McRaven reaffirmed this belief when he stated, “USSOCOM’s people are its most valuable resource” (USSOCOM,

2012, p. 2). Leaders and operators in SOF communities live by this truth, and it is reflected in the amount of attention they dedicate to the recruitment and training of future teammates—for ultimately it is the cohesive bonds among a team of highly skilled individual operators that enable SOF units to accomplish the nation's most demanding tasks.

Though special operators today have access to the most up-to-date technological advances on the battlefield and benefit from unprecedented resourcing, it is the individual who remains the vital integrating factor (USSOCOM, 2012). It is for this reason that special operators consistently seek to improve themselves and the teams to which they belong. Although certain mechanisms aimed at developing service members are embedded in the military's hierarchical structure, SOF teams often work with minimal supervision. It is thus especially critical that they be able to grow, mature, and improve unit cohesion from within. Understanding the nature of developmental relationships and the outcomes they make possible is paramount to supporting the first SOF Truth. Most importantly, educating and empowering operators to develop one another strengthens the intangible aspect of our community that sets us apart from all others and makes us who we are: The Brotherhood.

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## **APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS LIST (Q1–Q41)**

1. Can you give us a quick rundown of your military service to this point?; what you did before SOF, which group or other units you have served in within SOF, etc.?
2. Why did you join the military?
3. Why did you join SOF?
4. Can you describe a person (or persons) who has helped to develop you?
5. Demographics of that person(s): Rank, MOS, position, etc.
6. What characteristics of that person(s) do you feel most contributed to your development?
7. How did your developmental relationship/interaction begin?
8. What did that person(s) do for you?
9. Did meaningful assistance consist of more career-oriented advice or more personal support?
10. On a scale of 1–5, was what was provided very beneficial or not very? (1 being most important)
11. What was the most important function/aspect of the relationship?
12. How much time and/or effort did that person provide you? (frequency and length of interactions, level of perceived devotion/effort, communication/interaction, and setting/location)
13. Who seemed to take the initiative on reaching out first?
14. What were the events/actions that caused you to reach out for support?
15. When on a team, do you feel that you helped to professionally or personally develop others?
16. Demographics of the person(s) you developed?
17. What characteristics did you think were important for you to embody?
18. How did that developmental relationship/interaction begin?
19. What prompted you to take a more focused approach in that person's development?

20. What do you do for the person(s) you develop?
21. Do you offer more career-oriented advice or more personal support?
22. On a scale of 1–5, is what you provide very beneficial or not very? (1 being most important)
23. How can you tell that you were effective (or not) in that person's development?
24. How much time and/or effort did you provide that person(s)? (frequency and length of interactions, level of perceived devotion/effort, communication/interaction, and setting/location)
25. Who seemed to take the initiative on reaching out first?
26. What were the events/actions that caused that person(s) to reach out to you, or for you to focus your development on them?
27. In a situation in which someone helped you, did they realize they were helping you to develop?
28. In a situation in which you helped someone else, did they always/sometimes/never realize you were attempting to help them develop?
29. Have you ever participated in a formal development program in the military?
30. In your opinion/experience, does formal (mandated) development work in the military?
31. What would be the top one or two drawbacks you would foresee with a formal (mandated) development program among SOF operators?
32. Does the organizational culture/team environment facilitate developmental relationships? Do developmental relationships work better on small teams or in larger organizations?
33. Can you describe a team environment that would be conducive to development of SOF operators?
34. While on your team, who would you not go to for personal or professional development?
35. In your experience, when a newly qualified SOF operator arrived to the team, what developmental characteristics do you feel he most lacked?

36. In your experience, regarding the senior personnel (leadership, E7 and up, top 50%...) on your team, what developmental characteristics do you feel they most lacked?
37. What characteristics do you most value in someone who develops you?
38. What do you assess is your best learning style? (personal reading & study, group discussion, pictures & videos, hands-on, observation of others, etc.)
39. Can you describe one action/choice/event where your developer most impressed you?
40. Can you describe one action/choice/event where your developer most let you down?
41. Do you have any further comments/input you would like to share before we conclude the interview?

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## APPENDIX B. SOF OPERATOR BACKGROUND AND AMPLIFYING INFO (Q2 & Q3)

Every service member joins the military for his or her own reasons. Common reasons may include: national service, the benefits, or interest in a specific job. We asked each interviewee why he joined. The responses did not necessarily correlate with interviewees' later responses about development. That is why we provided them here. We think they illuminate another aspect of what operators seek and expect.

We asked two simple questions. *Why did you join the military?* and *Why did you join SOF?* Responses indicate that 32% of those we interviewed joined to serve; 29% had a general interest in the military; 21% joined in keeping with family tradition (e.g. "because my dad did"); 14% said they were looking for some sort of direction in life; and 4% cited the benefits. Other common themes were that operators joined for: the challenge, to serve with the elite, to be part of the brotherhood, and because they had been influenced previously by SOF personnel. None of the responses were particularly profound and many were repetitive of one another. We present several of the responses here to paint a deeper picture of our interview population. A few of the responses follow:

Q2 responses (*Why did you join the military?*):

[I joined because] I was going to a school at the time, and I felt like what I was doing was pretty meaningless, especially at the height of the Iraq war. I had friends who had already deployed and I was ready to enlist, but the recruiter convinced me to finish school first. (E6, Special Forces)

I always knew I wanted to do at least 4 years of service. My dad engrained in us that we should do national service and I wanted to do mine in the military. (O3, SEAL)

1. [I joined because] I could not get a job out of college (history degree), and didn't want to do grad school then, 2. Was going to join ROTC, but my USAF lawyer brother talked me out of it 3. 9/11 was still heavy on my mind after graduation 4. Have had a grandpa/relative in every major conflict since WWII, and wanted to honor that memory, or to not have anybody be able to say I wasn't willing to serve my country. 5. Had a chip on my shoulder, wanted to prove something to myself, to others. 6.

Hollywood marketing does a good job about bad-assery and glorious stuff. (E7, Special Forces)

I was previously a sous chef; it was a stressful industry; you would get burned a lot. One year around Christmas-time my brother (SOF) was telling me how cool he was because he had the coolest job. He said I could do some new program (18X) and come in. So I did. I also wanted the stability that the military offered so I could have a family some day. (E7, Special Forces)

My father was in the military, did a career, and retired. I wanted to do that. 9/11 definitely solidified my intent to join the army. (O4, Special Forces)

I wanted to serve my country, family heritage, long line of military people, wanted to carry the tradition. Wasn't too sure what I wanted to do when I joined, but oh well. (E7, Special Forces)

I realized having a career in professional hockey was not going to be realistic. So, while going to college I went to OCS, finished college, and accepted a commission. (O4, Raider)

Q3 responses (*Why did you join SOF?*):

I was attracted to the "eliteness" of it and wanted to be a part of the brotherhood. Growing up I had the experience of observing my father and his interaction with his friends. (O1E, SEAL)

I was bored as an 11B and didn't know what else to do. Then everyone said it was cool when I passed selection. (E8, Special Forces)

I lucked into it. During my second OIF tour the USMC stood up the ETU (expeditionary training unit), which I volunteered for. It was supposed to be more small-team focused, more independent missions, and would handle some of the non-combat [Foreign Internal Defense (FID)] missions that the USMC was doing. ETU became MARSOC later on when that started. I would have been drawn to MARSOC anyway, for the same reasons I came to ETU. (O4, Raider)

[I joined for the] eliteness. The best people were there. I was influenced by my experience in the reserve army. I needed to be around people who took soldiering more seriously. Quality of people. (O6, Special Forces)

I never contemplated Big Army, it was never in my wheelhouse. I figured go big or go home. I never doubted that SF was achievable. (E7, Special Forces)

I looked at CCT (combat controller) initially, but the super swimming requirements pushed me away to SF. I am a land-based creature. (E7, Special Forces)

[Reasons I joined:] challenge, eliteness and to be around others who were elite. (E9, SEAL)

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## APPENDIX C. ARMY SPECIAL FORCES OBSERVATIONS

When discussing development among SOF operators, interviewees found numerous opportunities to expound on aspects of their jobs and the greater SOF community that either contributed to or detracted from effective personal and professional development. Some operators, particularly those in Army Special Forces, raised issues about either the Special Forces Regiment or SOF as a whole, they may see having impacts on retention, job satisfaction, the quality of leaders, and ultimately on operator development.

In the body of the thesis we discussed senior operator weaknesses, the challenges and effects of growing the force post-9/11, and the importance of the Team Chief/Team Sergeant position. Some respondents raised the issue of the lack of a community identity in recent years, which affects who we recruit, who we put into leadership positions, and where we focus our time and resources. Every civilian or military organization likely faces similar challenges, to include disgruntled employees. However, an organization that prides itself on selecting the “best of the best” and on being elite, one would think that the “rotten from the inside” comments would be few and far between. Our sample size is considerably smaller than 1% of the operator force. Yet, nearly a quarter of those interviewed (or nearly half of Army interviewees) brought up concerns such as:

It [professional development] depends on what the end-state is of professional development. Are we just trying to make cogs in the machine? Or make guys who are able to influence the rest of big army? We’re supposed to be good at building rapport with partner forces, yet we fail at working with big army. This hurts us in carrying the SF message and brand in a positive way. (E6, Special Forces)

The scorched-earth policy in SF is terrible. Firing the entire team leadership doesn’t fix the problem, it just makes the team keep it in-house. When the young 18B is thinking about getting in trouble, he knows the TS is going to keep it within the team, because TS doesn’t want to get fired either, so the 18B knows he can “go all out” and nothing will happen. I think SF has always put more input into its officer development, vice NCOs. (E8, Special Forces)

We're still searching for our identity as a regiment. It's the whole [unconventional warfare] vs. FID argument. Why not do what we're best at? Be realistic. We coin new terms all the time, surgical strike vs. special warfare, etc. We're doing poorly at retaining guys. Guys with no other opportunities end up staying in the military, while others got out or went to [special mission units] or something. (O5, Special Forces)

We need to start very early on with education of what the regiment is supposed to be doing. Are we all direction action / CIF / Ranger Regiment? Are we party boys in other countries? Are we more commandos or more by-with-through guys? We need more of the by-with-through to develop the Regiment. Those who are too CIF-focused, the advise & assist goes out the window; they're only focused on making their shot group better and not on how they can develop the team and the indigenous force. (O4, Special Forces)

The lack of senior level guidance (team mission letters) down to the teams has deeper ramifications; it doesn't empower the TL to reinforce the command emphasis. It instead lets the juniors end up thinking they have a say in figuring out the direction of the team. The pendulum has swung too far to one side. Where's our focus? Regionally? Skill set? All that changes who you get your advice from, who you listen to. (O4, Special Forces)

I personally don't think SOF is doing a good job right now. [It is] unable to retain guys, unable to adapt to the new fast paced information world. Things change fast. The stuff we're trained on is good, but it's not enough to keep us ahead of the bad guys. SF should be more selective in who they're taking and who they're not. We should be less concerned with keeping numbers, but more concerned in the environment you come into after graduation; it shouldn't be "what the heck is going on here?" Needs to be more focused on letting things happen rather than trying to mitigate all the bad things that could happen—it's a giant black hole of time consuming madness. There are all these regulations, but really it's whether or not the command directly involved is hands on or hands off; if they're too hands-on, it creates an environment that's not conducive to keeping guys around. Need an environment to allow some autonomy, allow creativity. A team's autonomy is almost non-existent now; there are too many people that have to be answered to. (E7, Special Forces)

We need to seriously trim the fat. The regiment is a bloody beast; the international incidents, attempted murder charges, the drugs, the op fund issues.... There's a lot of sickness in the regiment. We need some deep reflection on who we are. There's no top cover for the big incidents. Let's just burn the mf'er down and start over. (E7, Special Forces)

Worth noting is that these comments reflect concerns about issues that inhibit effective development within the SOF community and Special Forces Regiment. Yet, each respondent had as many positive things to say about his job as the concerns he voiced. The questions we posed were about personal and professional development. Nonetheless, we received answers about Regiment identity issues, micromanagement, risk aversion, recruiting, maturity, toxic leadership, and illegal, unethical, and/or immoral actions. Had we asked questions specifically about what is wrong with the Regiment, the responses may have been even more telling for current and future Special Forces leaders.

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## APPENDIX D. OTHER SOF DEVELOPMENT OBSERVATIONS

### A. LARGE OR SMALL ORGANIZATIONS (Q32)

Special operations forces have the unique but not exclusive advantage of working in small teams in remote locations for extended periods of time. This creates both advantages and challenges for individual and team development. Respondents were queried about their views regarding development in large or small organizations—Specifically, they were asked: *Do developmental relationships work better on small teams or in larger organizations?* All of our respondents have served or are serving in a small-team setting, and not surprisingly the most common response was “small teams,” although this was not universally true and the go-to answer of “it depends” applies. Pros and cons cited for each reflect attitudes toward bureaucracy, the sheer number (or lack) of people, and the continually subjective view of the beholder.

Representative comments follow:

It's way better in a small team setting. Large organizations break down into smaller groups that are normally very hierarchal in nature, the broken down groups have less chance of varying ranks to mesh and interact with. The 12 guys on a team have fewer outlets, so they connect better because everyone has to do something; you can't afford for anyone to sit out. (O4, Raider)

Development works better on small teams. A bigger or oversized platoon has people with nothing to do; newer SEALs aren't being groomed. (O3, SEAL)

Small teams are more responsive to individual needs, whereas for a large group it [development] gets dumbed down, but you could show a TED Talk or something. (O3E, SEAL)

A smaller environment is definitely better. In large organizations people become fearful of being ostracized, of being different from the group. It's easier to give one-on-one advice to one person than to a large auditorium of people. (O4, Special Forces)

Large organization. In a large organization you'll see less of the faults of your mentors. A small team requires maturity to overlook the faults of those who are developing and being developed. (O4, Special Forces)

Larger organization—because it can maintain continuity that professional development is happening. In small organizations, there's no one holding it [development] accountable, it has to start at the top. (E8, Special Forces)

Large organizations would work better, where everyone feels equal, there's more distance between people, more autonomous, the best feedback comes from outside. Small teams are too competitive, insulated, you can't say anything; whereas a mentorship program would draw from outside perspectives. (O4, Special Forces)

In a large organization the water (info) would get more diluted. A small team is able to develop the specificity better. (E7, Special Forces)

In large organizations someone gets alienated, someone always wants attention. (O4, Raider)

Small teams—it forces personal interaction between individuals. The more folks there are, the easier it is to become a loner and disappear. (O4, Special Forces)

Better in smaller teams. It's a lot easier to have personal relationships and cater the development to the individual. Development in a larger organization is more generic and whitewashed. (E6, Special Forces)

In our experience as special operators, working in small teams demands that every man pulls his own weight, continually progresses, and is value-added. Due to the small-team structure, every operator is essentially working under a magnifying glass, whereby his flaws are quickly and widely known. Larger organizations do offer a greater diversity of characters to interact with, and consequently less competition in larger organizations may work for some individuals. Regardless of the size of the group, team leaders should be trying to create an environment that allows positive development to occur.

## **B. SOF VIEWS ON FORMALIZED DEVELOPMENT (Q29, Q30, & Q31)**

Numerous civilian businesses and organizations utilize formal development programs to grow their junior leaders. These programs can vary from assigning long-term mentors to task-specific coaches to quarterly development seminars. Many of these programs are being experimented with/used in the military, each to different degrees of success. One key challenge for service members is that they will move locations repeatedly throughout their careers. Developpees rarely have longer than a year or two

with a developer. Any assigned one-on-one development, even if the pairing was perfectly done, would inevitably be interrupted when one or both members move away. While people can stay in contact if they choose, not even this is easy, due to deployments, mission demands, etc.

### **1. Formal development participation (Q29)**

We asked participants: *Have you ever participated in a formal development program in the military?* The responses were either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. If ‘yes’ we then asked for a description. Although we were more interested in assigned mentorship programs, as opposed to the occasional “E7 and up” mandatory professional development lectures, participants told us about the development programs they experienced. Although 69% experienced no formal development, here is a sampling of what we heard:

As an infantry lieutenant the chaplain headed a “strong bonds” program. It would take a senior leader and pair them with a junior person; wherein the gap was big enough that there weren’t any chain of command or UCMJ conflicts. It was voluntary to join, but the pairing was decided by someone else. I was paired with an infantry private. We spent a four day retreat pheasant hunting. I haven’t talked to him since. (O4, Special Forces)

I have had mentors assigned, even though it’s informal with no paperwork, but sometimes it’s kind of useless when it’s a peer who is maybe 6 months senior to you. There have been some required professional development classes to attend sometimes. (O4, Raider)

### **2. Formal development effectiveness (Q30)**

To further elicit operator opinions on the topic, we asked: *In your opinion/experience, does formal (mandated) development work in the military?* The collective response was “it depends,” with numerous suggestions for how it would have to work to be successful or why it would not be successful. Both those in favor and those not sure emphasized that it would have to be done right. A few participants pointed to their service’s established counseling programs as holding potential for making a meaningful difference in individuals’ development. However, mandatory programs that were in place often carried a forced, boring, or negative connotation. These ideas and the

following comments could prove useful to those considering implementation of a formal program, or improving those already in existence:

I haven't seen a formal mentorship program. If someone were to suggest it, I would be wary. It smells of big army SHARP training stuff. The ad hoc exposure to more senior professionals has been the main thing I've experienced and it's been helpful. (E6, Special Forces)

No, that is redundant. The army already has a hierarchy and chain of command and they need to focus on that. (E8, Special Forces)

You need at least two people, someone should be at least two levels of higher experience than you. They would have to be selected to do it, to select the right people, the right mentor. You would meet twice quarterly. Both the mentor and mentee would have to understand that each has to reach out to the other, understand it's two ways. Mentors need to actively pursue mentees. Mentors need to be consistent, they can explain the systems and processes, provide guidance, and help you to develop your junior officers and enlisted leaders. (O4, Special Forces)

On a team, you're already supposed to have that, so a formal program isn't needed. (E7, Special Forces)

Yes and no. You need to be fully vested in it. If not it becomes a "going through the motions" and loses the intent, but good things can still come out of it. Quarterly counseling allow for constant engagement. (O4, Special Forces)

It depends. Mandatory can be valuable to get people talking. It's more effective when it comes from the heart. It pays way more dividends. (E9, SEAL)

I'm not sure, but yes, there should be a process. I like the senior/junior match-up that the SFODAs have. Something needs to happen, guys need a mentor, but mandating formal mentoring is maybe going too far. If it's something you "have" to do, it'll be less effective. You have to want to improve, not just be made to improve. (O4, Raider)

I think it can work; you're going to give a guy more "looks" at things, more pearls of wisdom. (O3E, SEAL)

### **3. Formal development drawbacks (Q31)**

We also asked: *What would be the top one or two drawbacks you would foresee with a formal (mandated) development program among SOF operators?* One of the

common concerns was that it sounds like “mandatory fun.” Others emphasized that personalities would need to match, leaders would need to emphasize this, and it would need to be service specific to ensure success. Issues such as being able to make time, ensuring both parties were committed to it, and screening for the right mentor were also mentioned.

It becomes “mandatory fun” and there needs to be a personality match for it to work. (O4, Special Forces)

There’s no time for it, we’re already overworked and overtasked. (E8, Special Forces)

People willing to take a mentoring program seriously are already doing those things well. If you mandate it, you’ll have some who won’t take it as seriously. (O4, Special Forces)

SOF guys don’t like shit mandated to them. It sets the wrong tone when it’s top down instead of bottom up. In other words, it should be developed by the users and guys who need it. (E7, SEAL)

More paperwork wouldn’t help; we already have required counseling that many people don’t do; no one wants to deal with more paperwork. (O4, Raider)

It has to be the right match-up, because some are better than others at learning from other people. Other problems would occur if the pairing wasn’t well matched. (E7, Special Forces)

Can’t be one size fits all. It has to be community specific. (O3E, SEAL)

#### **4. Chain of command concerns**

Some operators were concerned about the control of information within their teams. Going outside of a chain of command for development can allow for different points of view. Depending on the flavor of the concern, or of the development, it can be beneficial to go outside of the team, but this probably should only be undertaken with leadership awareness and with the right intent in mind. Operators must pursue the attainment of the personal and professional development that suits them best, understanding the nature of the structure of military hierarchy. Some leaders have concerns about loyalty or protocol when an operator is receiving orders from his chain of

command, but is receiving alternate guidance and influence from someone outside the hierarchy.

When you find yourself in a position where you don't know what to do, you need to have your go-to guys and they might not be in your chain of command. (O6, Special Forces)

For me I would usually not go to someone within the chain of command since allegiances are unknown (for an issue which could have various recourses). For the team guys they would go to the team sergeant if they knew he would inevitably become aware of the issue, but otherwise for personal issues they would go outside the team. It was all about being in control of your own destiny. (O4, Special Forces)

Perception of assigned mentor outside of the chain of command could be problematic. Guys would be suspicious or apprehensive of "airing dirty laundry." It would have to be consistent with rank and position of an individual. Some might not be capable of it. (O4, Special Forces)

There's also a big issue with cross-contamination – if my NCO is getting taught different stuff by someone else, that causes problems for me. (E8, Special Forces)

## **5. Military “professional development”**

Worth noting is that numerous military courses are marketed as 'professional development' or 'leadership' courses. Many respondents discussed their career-mandated schooling as the version of development they experienced. In other words, the only development many operators have had was a course they “had” to attend. These are required to attain promotion or qualify for one's position. While many of these courses undoubtedly provide tools to enable success, they are also focused on large groups who must “check the block” to keep moving upward. In the absence of informal one-on-one style mentoring programs, the military mass-develops.

The following responses indicate participants' views on some professional development courses, though not generalized to the military's professional education system:

It depends [effectiveness of mandated programs]. You need the right guys to mentor, you know... credible, active duty guys. The SEAL instructor course is fluff, disconnected. Should be geared towards future enlisted

leadership positions [LPO, CPO], should be an interactive class with sharing. (E8, SEAL)

I went to the special operations instructor course, it was garbage. We were taught by civilians with no SOF experience, they were just trying to teach us to teach and it was a complete waste of two weeks that I will never get back again. I just needed my instructor identifier. (E7, Special Forces)

It's late [professional education courses]. Every course [BNCOC, ANCOC, SLC] is always late for our next job. The content taught should be given years earlier. When I went we just learned combatives, with SLC on the side. PLDC was good, because that set me up as an E5. Also, SF has been so backlogged for SLC that they can't take E6(P)s anymore. (E8, Special Forces)

Our professional education system is okay, but big gaps exist between formal events, like between WLC – BNCOC – ANCOC. Online training probably is not the answer. Maybe something formal in between but... Army counseling is a great tool, but it's not as serious or meaningful as it could be. Maybe change the "perception" of counseling packets, more focused on how to develop someone and not something negative. (O4, Special Forces)

### **C. KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS FOR OTHER DEVELOPMENT TOPICS**

Operators cited pros and cons for development depending on the size of the organization. In addition, the consensus from operators is that formal development may not be feasible or effective. This parallels other studies that indicate mandated programs are less desirable and less effective than informal programs (Allen, Eby, & Lentz, 2006; Noe, 1988).

In analyzing our respondents' comments, here are our key findings:

- Most operators' experience is with small team environments. Working in small teams can generate more pressure and focus to improve development. There is also more opportunity for interpersonal bonding. Larger organizations can offer more variety and greater access to more potential developers. Each offers pros and cons for operator development. The reality in SOF is smaller teams. Thus, leaders need to focus on working within that structure.
- Formal development within the military, according to SOF operators, is generally not wanted. It has "mandatory fun" written all over it. Few operators have experienced an assigned mentorship program, and many

are skeptical of its effectiveness. We heard from some respondents that established counseling programs do, however, provide more opportunities to influence and develop subordinates.

- If formal development is to be undertaken in the SOF community, consideration needs to be given to the limited time available to operators. From operators' perspectives, formal development would have to be done properly, with leaders' buy-in, the matching of personalities, and screening of the right developers.
- Operators need to be aware of potential conflicts and the perception of potential conflicts if they approach a person outside their chain of command to provide them with development.
- Many operators cited professional military education as the only method of development they have experienced thus far. They noted that some education courses are more focused on meeting a mandatory career checkpoint than on assisting with development.



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